

Kate *of*  
Kate Hall

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KATE OF KATE HALL

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By ELLEN THORNEYCROFT FOWLER

CONCERNING ISABEL CARNABY

A DOUBLE THREAD

THE FARRINGDONS

FUEL OF FIRE

PLACE AND POWER

CUPID'S GARDEN

SIRIUS, AND OTHER STORIES

LOVE'S ARGUMENT, AND OTHER POEMS

Etc.

Etc.

By ALFRED LAURENCE FELKIN

(A. ST. LAURENCE)

MY HEART AND LUTE

# Kate of Kate Hall

BY

ELLEN THORNEYCROFT FOWLER

(MRS. A. L. FELKIN)

AND

ALFRED LAURENCE FELKIN

"Kate of Kate Hall, my super-dainty Kate"

*The Taming of the Shrew*

HUTCHINSON AND CO.  
PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON

1904





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DEDICATION

"EACH TO EACH"

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# KATE OF KATE HALL

## CHAPTER I

### CLAVERLEY CASTLE

“THERE is no other way,” quoth the Earl, with much stateliness and decision: “no other way,” he repeated, and lay back in his chair, his fingers daintily pressed one against the other—he was justly proud of his hands—with the air of a man who has settled a delicate point, and whose sentence is final.

“I am afraid you are right,” sighed the Countess. Most women sigh when they suspect that their husbands are right: it is naturally a matter for regret. Then she looked with some apprehension in the direction of her daughter.

Lady Katharine Clare said nothing at all; but an observer—even a careless observer—might have detected, in her compressed lips and defiant pose, strong dissent from the paternal dictum. Her father, at any rate, was under no illusion that in this case silence could be interpreted as consent.

“If in your obstinacy you refuse to agree to my proposal,” he went on, addressing his daughter with deliberate emphasis, “there is, so far as I can see, but one alternative. The old place will have to be let or sold, and we shall be compelled to turn out to make room for a set of counter-jumpers.”

The Earl contrived with some art to put a touch of pathos into his voice, as he mournfully shook his head over the

lamentable prospect he had conjured up with the object of softening Lady Kate's stony heart.

"They will spoil the furniture," added the Countess, "I know they will. People of that class are always untidy in their habits."

Lady Claverley was a stately dame of distinguished manners; but she had a genius for domestic duty, and on a lower social plane would have proved an invaluable housewife. She was mentally incapable of seeing anything by the light of an abstract principle; but she battered on the concrete and revelled in detail. An exceptionally beautiful woman, she was nevertheless utterly devoid of vanity; and her attitude of absolute indifference towards her own wardrobe was a source of abiding sorrow to the heart of her maid. Fortunately for herself—and still more fortunately for Lord Claverley—she was married before it became the fashion for a woman to regard her husband merely as an interesting and instructive social problem, requiring a purely intellectual solution; she belonged to that blessed generation of women who regarded their husbands in very much the same way as men of science regard the great forces of nature—as dimly comprehended powers, mighty and terrible when uncontrolled, but capable, under proper guidance and management, of being adapted to the most ordinary and domestic uses.

"But what makes us so specially poor to-day, father?" asked Lady Katharine. "Poorer than we were yesterday, or than we shall be to-morrow?"

"The fact that I have been through all the estate accounts with my agent, and have made the pleasing discovery that we simply cannot afford to live any longer at Claverley Castle."

Kate stamped her foot.

"It will be the ruin of the Castle if we let it," cried the Countess, with a mournful shake of her head; "only yesterday Brown was telling me"—Mrs. Brown was the housekeeper—"that nobody in the world but herself knows exactly where to

put baths when it rains, so as to keep the water from lying in pools on the carpets; but she knows just the places where the rain comes in."

"It is just possible," suggested the Earl, "that, unlike ourselves, the new tenants might afford to repair the roof."

The Countess looked doubtful.

"Yes," continued the Earl, "I have come across middle-class families where such a thing could be done."

"Then it would be very impertinent of them and a great liberty to come repairing our roof when we hadn't done so," cried Lady Kate; "it would be as bad as putting somebody else's bonnet straight, which I always think is most frightfully rude. But can nothing be done to keep horrid people from meddling with our roof at all?"

"I have pointed out to you the only way to avert this catastrophe," her father replied; "you must marry money—and at once."

"But I don't want to marry at all just yet—not even a man; and it would bore me most horribly to marry a fortune!"

"Then the Castle must go; there is no other way." The Earl spoke sternly, and shot a keen glance at his daughter from under his heavy eyebrows to note the effect of his words. Lady Kate, who was dressed for riding, made no reply, but began humming a tune under her breath. She always hummed when she was out of temper; it was a little way she had; and the more annoyed she was, the more sacred became the tune. Just now the air happened to be the National Anthem.

"But men with money are always so common," objected Lady Claverley, coming with true maternal solicitude to her daughter's aid; "and poor dear mamma always brought us up to have a great horror of commonness."

"And poor dear mamma also brought you up to have a great horror of poverty, if my memory serves me right," replied the Earl.

"She did, Claverley, and she knew what she was talking

about; for poverty is a most uncomfortable thing, and is always associated in my mind with sickness or crime. It seems peculiar for people like ourselves to be poor—very peculiar indeed.”

“Nevertheless we are.” The Earl’s tone was gloomy.

“Well, I repeat it is very peculiar; and I can’t imagine what poor dear mamma would have said if she’d been alive.”

But Lord Claverley could very well imagine. During the lifetime of the late Marchioness of Dunbar his experience as to what she would say in circumstances of which she did not approve was not such as to render the memory thereof a pleasant playground for the imagination; so he kept silence.

As for his daughter, she merely “confounded their politics,” and then proceeded to “frustrate their knavish tricks.” When Kate went on to a second verse she was very angry indeed.

But it took more than ill temper to stop Lady Claverley when once fairly under way. “After all, poverty is worse to bear than commonness; as a matter of fact, common young men are often very well brought up; and if a man is well brought up any woman can make herself happy with him.”

Here Kate dashed into the conversation. “I should hate the sight of a husband,” she exclaimed; “simply hate and loathe and detest it!”

“I do not know that that very much signifies,” remarked her father blandly; “many modern women hate the sight of their husbands—at least so current literature and the daily papers have led me to believe; but they generally contrive to look the other way.”

“You mean, papa, that I needn’t see much of the man when once I am married to him.”

“I mean you need not see anything at all of him. Untoward circumstances may compel people of our class to marry persons of humble origin; but,” added the Earl nobly, “nothing can compel us so to forget what is due to ourselves as to visit with them.”



"But I daresay he would have some dreadfully common name," remarked Lady Claverley, "Jones or Smith or even Tomkins. You never can tell with people of that sort what they may not be called."

"That again would have no bearing upon the matter in hand. The person to whom we are referring would of course resign his own name and take ours."

"I suppose he would—just as footmen do. Whatever a footman may have been christened, I always insist on calling him Charles. It was mamma's rule, and it saves so much confusion."

"Obviously, my love, the method recommends itself to those who are anxious to keep clear of avoidable error."

"I remember before our present Charles came he wrote to Brown, 'I will answer to the name of Charles and will serve her ladyship faithful.' I thought it so nice and obliging of him, considering that he had been christened Samuel."

"And, may I ask, has he fulfilled his early promise?" Lord Claverley might not be invariably pleasant, but he was always polite.

"Well, Claverley, as a matter of fact I came to your room this morning to talk to you about him; but you began about our poverty and Kate's marriage, and quite put Charles out of my head. He is being rather tiresome just at present—keeps giving notice and stupid things of that kind."

"And is that an unmitigated disadvantage? Although he still answers to the name of Charles, he has almost entirely outgrown the habit of answering the bell; and that is distinctly inconvenient."

"But he is six foot two and a teetotaler, and so well brought up: he has actually been confirmed and vaccinated!"

"Nevertheless it is his duty to answer the bell if I ring when Perkins is out; and the fulfilment of this duty does not appear to be one of the many excellences of Charles who was christened Samuel."

"But he cleans plate so beautifully. I'm sure it is quite a pleasure to look at oneself upside down in our spoons."

"Moreover he persists in blowing out the taper with which he has lighted the candles: a most reprehensible custom," objected Lord Claverley.

"You should just do as I do: shut your eyes and not smell it," retorted his wife.

"Well, my love (to turn to higher and more interesting subjects), as you have succeeded in elevating the somewhat ordinary name of Charles into an official title instead of a mere Christian name——"

"Just as popes are generally called Pius and spaniels Carlo," remarked Lady Katharine.

Her father ignored the interruption. "So the man of Kate's choice must answer to the name of Clare. Whether he will also 'serve her ladyship faithful' is a more problematical question—as it apparently is likewise in the case of a footman."

But the mention of Charles had proved too strong a temptation for Lady Claverley: she clung to him as a dog to a bone, and would not be shaken off. "And he is so obliging and good-tempered, and keeps his livery so clean."

"My love, my love, recall yourself. We are speaking of Katharine's future husband." Lord Claverley and his better-half never saw eye to eye upon the question of relative proportion.

"The fact is, Claverley, you so upset him by that scolding you gave him yesterday when he knocked the coal-box over, that this morning he has again given notice. As Brown very properly says, we shall never succeed in getting another footman at such low wages; and yet we can hardly afford to give more."

"But, my love, consider the noise—as well as the uncleanness—of an overturned coal-box! The hideousness of the crash—totally unexpected as it was—completely threw me off

my balance for the time being, and, I confess, almost tempted me to a display of by no means unjustifiable temper."

Lady Claverley sighed. "Almost tempted you? Oh, Claverley, what a way of putting it! And, besides, I don't see how it could have been totally unexpected, considering that Charles has lived with us for eighteen months. You must know, as well as I do, that he has at least three big upsets a week; and I'm always so thankful when it's coal and not china."

"But, my love, you apparently do not comprehend what excruciating tortures I derive from these sudden and deafening catastrophes—I who am endowed with such an intense longing for the eternal harmony of the great silences."

"My dear Claverley, it is ridiculous to expect that you can get the eternal harmony of the great silences for twenty-five pounds a year and no beer! Because you can't."

The Earl waved his hand in well-bred impatience. "Ah, my love, do not waste valuable time upon the mere trifles of existence such as Charles, when so important a matter as Kate's marriage is staring us in the face."

"It is the mere trifles of existence that lay the table for lunch and go out with the carriage. I always make a rule—poor dear mamma taught it me—to do first what wants doing worst; and Charles leaves this day month, unless something can be done to induce him to stay; while your own common sense shows you that Kate couldn't possibly be married as soon as that, because people have to be asked in church for at least three weeks, after the right man is chosen."

Here the bride-presumptive again joined in the conversation. "I can't help thinking that I should find marriage an awful bore. If you are married to a man, you are expected to be always honouring and obeying him, and tiresome things like that. I never honoured or obeyed anybody in my life, and I don't mean to begin."

"I should be the last to affirm that up to the present time

honour and obedience have been your most distinguishing excellences," said her father.

"Still, papa, if it could save the dear old place——"

"Which it certainly could, my dear child; let there be no doubts upon that score. And, believe me, you need not allow matrimony to interfere with the well-ordered regularity of existence to which you have hitherto been accustomed."

Lady Claverley laughed. "Needn't she, my dear? That's all you know about being married to a man!"

"But surely, Henrietta, the honour of being allied to our noble and ancient house ought to satisfy any low-born upstart so entirely as to annul in him any desire to intermeddle in affairs that do not concern him, or to intrude in circles wherein he has no rightful place."

"Perhaps it ought; but most certainly it won't. Nothing keeps a man from interfering except not letting him know there's anything to interfere with. And the longer they're married the worse they get."

"Ah! my dear Henrietta, you are mistaking my point. Marriage between equals might—possibly would—confer the right of interference; but a mutual arrangement between patrician blood on the one side and plebeian wealth on the other, could not involve any impertinent arrogance on the part of the inferior of the two contracting parties."

"Probably it couldn't; but all the same it would. It is the things that can't possibly happen which invariably do."

"Well, my love, doubtless you know better than I," said Lord Claverley in a tone which implied that most certainly she did not know half so well; "but I still presume to think that the lower orders have not yet so far forgotten what is due to their superiors as to dare to take advantage of any matrimonial arrangements into which those superiors may deign to enter for purely pecuniary considerations."

But Lady Claverley was no longer attending to her lord. "There's one thing," she said, "we might raise his wages.

Brown thinks that he would stay on for another three pounds a year, and I don't think we could get a footman as good as Charles for less than that. Let me see, how much does twenty-five and three come to? I never had much of a head for difficult sums."

"It amounts, my love, to exactly twenty-eight," replied the Earl, who was accustomed by long practice to his wife's somewhat rapid flights of fancy and changes of front.

"Thank you, my dear. How clever of you to do it so quickly—and all in your head, too, without a pencil or a bit of paper! And there's one other thing we haven't thought of—there's Mrs. MacBalloch."

Lord Claverley's slower mind bravely endeavoured—as was its wont—to keep pace with his wife's. "I likewise have thought of her, but I do not feel convinced that she will be of much benefit to us in our present straits."

"Katharine is her goddaughter; and people are always supposed to leave things to their godchildren when they die." Lady Claverley's English was ever inferior to her common sense.

"True, my love; but she is not dead—nor do I see any reason why she should be. She is still a comparatively young woman."

Kate's mother after the flesh sighed over the possible longevity of Kate's mother after the spirit. "People never die when you want them to! I've noticed that one's distant relations always refuse to die as long as one's clothes are black or grey. I once kept a cousin of my father's alive for years upon shepherd's plaid. I never wore anything else!"

"In a similar fashion, my dear Henrietta, Katharine MacBalloch will abundantly survive the present crisis in our pecuniary affairs."

"I know she will—even though we called Kate Katharine after her!" And Kate's mother sighed again over the ingratitude of Kate's godmother.

“And even if she were obliging enough to die to order, it doesn’t follow that she’d leave all her fortune to me,” suggested the proposed legatee of Mrs. MacBalloch’s estates.

Lord Claverley bowed his silvery head. “That is so, my dear child, that is so; there is no class of the community who so disgracefully disregard their parental obligations as godparents. If there were only a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Godchildren I would subscribe to it with pleasure.”

“You don’t generally get more from your godparents than a silver cup and their blessing,” said his wife, “neither of which is much use in after-life.”

“As your dear mother wisely points out,” continued Lord Claverley, bowing in the direction of his Countess as if to emphasize her wisdom, “it is not safe to put our trust in the early demise of Mrs. MacBalloch, although we have had encouraging news of late that the dear lady’s health is not what it used to be—alas!” The *alas!* was an afterthought, and a happy one.

Kate shook her pretty head. “Oh! that doesn’t amount to anything. The more delicate people are, the longer they live; and real invalids generally live on for centuries.”

“Fragile flowers, such as Katharine MacBalloch, are apt to linger long upon the stem. Is that not so, my love?” asked the Earl, turning to his wife.

But she gazed at him with the unseeing eyes of those who are thinking of something else. “Yes; I shall decide to raise his wages at once. Poor dear mamma never gave her first footman less than thirty, and she was a splendid manager.”

Lord Claverley did not attempt to dispute this. His remembrance of the late Lady Dunbar’s power of management was still vivid.

“There is my horse coming round,” exclaimed Kate, who had dropped into *The Blue Bells of Scotland* during the last few seconds; “so I’m off. If you succeed during my absence in marrying me to some butcher’s boy or grocer’s

assistant, please let me know ; but don't ask me to promise that I won't murder the wretch afterwards—because I shan't." With which cryptic utterance she bounded out of the room, in by no means the best of tempers.

Lady Katharine Clare was the only child of the Earl and Countess of Claverley, born after twelve years of childless married life, and therefore indulged to the top of her bent. As the title was one which could descend in the female line, she thereby saved it from extinction, laying her devoted parents—already overwhelmed with gratitude to her for being born at all—under a still further debt of gratitude. At her father's death she would be Countess of Claverley in her own right. But it seemed as if an empty title would be all to which she would succeed, as the rapidly decreasing rent-roll of the Claverley estates was already insufficient for the proper keeping up of themselves and the Castle situated in their midst.

The Earl was a typical aristocrat of the old school, distinguished by much consideration for other people and their concerns, and by a still deeper regard for himself and his ancient house. The former attribute was superficial ; the latter ingrained. He was refined and courtly and pompous and proud, and had all the chivalrous admiration for his beautiful Countess which such a man invariably cherishes towards the one woman whom he considers worthy of the honour of being his wife.

He did not understand her in the least, nor she him ; but what did that matter ? They loved and admired one another intensely, and considered nobody superior to each other except themselves ; which was held to be a safe foundation for conjugal happiness in the primitive days when George Augustus, fifteenth Earl of Claverley, took to wife the Lady Henrietta Maria Caroline Laurie, fourth daughter of the Marquis of Dunbar.

Lady Kate had inherited much of her father's distinguished bearing and pride of race, with more than a spice, it must be

admitted, of her father's self-will and hasty temper. As for beauty, there was no one in the whole county to be compared with Lady Katharine Clare. She was tall and slender, with curly brown hair, and the most bewitching eyes imaginable. The Clares had always been a handsome people, and this last of the race was the flower of that noble and distinguished family. She was not particularly clever, but she sometimes lighted on a happy expression that passed for wit; and if her temper was not invariably placid, who expects a woman to be at the same time both beautiful and amiable?

Yet for all her charms of mind and person, Lady Katharine did not marry. Ever since she was seventeen, men had come and men had gone, but Kate went on for ever in her light-hearted, irresponsible way, flouting her lovers to their faces for their impertinence in thinking she would stoop to be the goods and chattel of any husband upon earth. She was now just one-and-twenty; and although during the past four years she had had lovers by the score, not one of them had ever knocked at the antechamber of Kate's most obdurate and unsusceptible heart. Till they asked her to marry them she was fascination itself; and then she laughed them out of themselves, dealing ridicule with her sharp tongue until they cursed the day when they had worn their hearts upon their sleeves for this cruel girl to peck at; and then they departed and took unto wife some sweet, amiable woman, the most unlike they could find to Katharine Clare. These gentle creatures duly consoled their lords and masters, and fiercely hated, as all true women should, the girl to whose refusal they owed their earthly happiness. She was the acknowledged belle of all the balls for miles round; but she was unpopular in the county, was Lady Kate. The woman who has refused a man is rarely beloved in after years by either her quondam suitor or his subsequent wife; and this was Katharine Clare's position in most of the leading houses of Salopshire.

Claverley Castle was a fine old mansion in the west mid-



lands. It stood on rising ground, well protected on the east by dense woods, and faced the south-west, offering a magnificent view across the broad valley with its golden fields and green meadows which sloped downwards to the silver river, and then rose again until they lost themselves in the blue haze of the perpetual hills and everlasting mountains in the distant west. A spacious valley, usually calm and tranquil, beautiful with a peaceful quietude and home-like restfulness; and yet made glorious on a summer's evening by sunsets which covered the whole sky with gorgeous colouring, till the clouds themselves appeared as chariots of fire driven before the wings of the wind. Yet at times a westerly gale would sweep across the vale, reminding it that there were still undreamed-of beauties and delights beyond those azure hills, and bearing to the midland plain the strength and the scent of the western sea.

The Castle itself was of great antiquity so far as its central portion was concerned, namely, a magnificent hall, where the retainers of mediæval barons were wont to assemble—a hall panelled with oak black with age, decorated with suits of ancient armour, and the superb antlers of many a stately stag. At one end was a dais for my lord's dinner-table; on one side was a huge fireplace, at which an ox might have been roasted whole. Around three sides of the hall ran a gallery, out of which opened the bed-chambers. About this central hall successive lords had built and rebuilt, until Claverley Castle became a huge mansion of divers styles of architecture—the whole producing an effect which, if not æsthetically perfect, was at least extremely picturesque.

To keep the Castle in proper repair and to maintain the grounds in decent condition, necessitated a very considerable annual expenditure. Unfortunately agricultural depression had eaten a large hole in Lord Claverley's rent-roll, and he found himself not only unable to maintain the establishment he had formerly regarded as necessary for existence, but even to keep

the building waterproof. Hazardous speculation, undertaken in the vain hope of replenishing his dwindling revenues, had turned out unhappily, and the Earl found himself at last confronted with the question which he had tried in vain to evade, but which now was insistent for an answer—what was to be done? The Earl, though autocratic, was no tyrant; but he knew Kate loved every stone of the place; and try as he would, he could think of no alternative to the letting of the Castle to strangers, save the marriage of his daughter to a rich man. Hence these tears!

## CHAPTER II

### SAPPHIRA

THERE was a fourth member of the family party at Claverley Castle — namely Sapphira Lestrangle, an orphaned niece of the Earl. Her mother, the Lady Arabella Clare, had been Lord Claverley's only sister; her father, Aubrey Lestrangle, an artist of small repute, once came to Claverley Castle to paint Lady Arabella's portrait, and succeeded in catching the lady as well as her likeness. Poor Arabella had gone away with him, and out of her senses at the same time, though she was certainly old enough to have known better; and she passed the remainder of her life in that leisured repentance which is supposed to be the natural consequence of a hasty and ill-considered union.

Her father never forgave her, but refused to look upon her undutiful face again; and she had no mother, poor soul! to fight her battles for her with the paternal powers. Her brother was less obdurate; but when at last he entered into his heritage she already had entered into hers, and had gone to that home whither neither paternal affection nor marital remorse could follow her or vex her with their vain efforts to obliterate the indelible past.

She left one child, a daughter, whom she named Sapphira, as a testimony to her painfully acquired conviction that life and love, as far as women are concerned, are one huge lie. And she still further handicapped this same daughter for the race of existence by bequeathing to her a plain face and a passionate heart—a combination to be studiously avoided by all those women who desire happiness.

There is no getting away from the truth that the happiness of a woman very largely depends upon the amount of affection which she is able to win in her passage through life. A man sometimes may be happy without love; a woman, never. Therefore it behoves her to be pleasant, amiable, and adaptable; she must become a proficient in that art of politeness and gentle living, which is after all nothing but the outer form of the inner spirit of Christianity—that spirit which bids us all to love our neighbour as ourselves, and to do unto others as we would they should do unto us. To her a gracious and charming manner will be of more use than a profound knowledge of mathematics—a ready and sympathetic tact of greater advantage than an exhaustive study of the classics. If in addition to social gifts she has the power of working willingly with her hands or her head, so much the better. But the real happiness of her life—and of the lives of those about her—will depend mainly upon whether in her youth she has learned to open her mouth with wisdom and to guide her tongue by the law of kindness.

This lesson poor Sapphira Lestrangle had never been taught; wherefore all her sharpness of wit and readiness of tongue availed her nothing save to add to the number of those who were not her friends.

She was an insignificant-looking girl, with no features to speak of and less complexion. Her mother had died when she was little more than a child; and the subsequent unadulterated society of her father had turned her into an old woman. There were few things connected with the seamy and sordid side of life that Sapphira did not know, and fewer persons dwelling in its sunnier hemisphere whom she did not hate. Her hand was against every man, since she believed that every man's hand was against her; and she abundantly repaid that dislike for herself which she usually aroused by expecting.

After her mother's death Sapphira carried on with her

father a miserable hand-to-mouth existence, until his noble brother-in-law procured him a post abroad, which he inadequately filled for a certain period. Then he suddenly disappeared below the horizon-line, leaving no trace whatever of his whereabouts; and it was supposed that he had given up the ghost in some remote corner of the western hemisphere.

When Aubrey Lestrangle left England, a home was offered to his daughter by her uncle, Lord Claverley, who—to do him justice—had always been ready to render such assistance to his dead sister's husband as that husband's deficiencies of character would allow. So Sapphira came to live at Claverley Castle, imbued with a determination never to forgive Lord Claverley for being rich while her father was poor, nor Lady Katharine for being handsome while she herself was plain: a somewhat unjust but by no means uncommon form of implacability. It is always so much easier to forgive people for the evil they have done to us than for the good they have done to themselves.

Aubrey Lestrangle was one of those handsome scoundrels, who invariably earn the admiration of women and the contempt of men. His wife adored him, yet he broke her heart by his persistent failure to make anything worth making out of life; and his daughter equally adored him, though he made her as wretched as he had made her mother before her. He possessed the happy knack of disguising his mistakes as misfortunes and his sins as sufferings; consequently he was always pitied and never blamed.

Sapphira loved him when he was present as she would never love anyone else on earth; and in his absence she brought all her power of imagination to bear upon the idealizing of him, until to her he appeared the embodiment of human grace and wisdom and unappreciated virtue. It never occurred to her—any more than it had occurred to her mother—that the person who was to blame for Aubrey Lestrangle's failure in life was not the Providence That made him, nor

the world that despised him, nor even entirely the devil that tempted him—but Aubrey LeStrange himself.

On the afternoon of the day following the foregoing conversation, the three ladies of Claverley Castle were having tea in the blue drawing-room, and were discussing still further that proposition of the Earl which had caused such searchings of heart in the family circle on the preceding day.

“It does seem hard,” remarked Lady Katharine, who was sitting on the hearthrug and playing with her two collies, Bubble and Squeak, “that I should be obliged to marry some horrid man whom I’ve never seen and can’t bear; yet if I don’t, papa says we shall all have to go to the workhouse.”

“The workhouse indeed!” scoffed Sapphira. “You know about as much about the workhouse as I do about paradise—and are just as likely to go there.”

“No, we don’t like the workhouse, do we, Squeaky dear?” Kate continued, endeavouring to tie Squeak’s ears into a knot on the top of his head; “they’d give us nasty dog biscuits instead of nice cake, and wouldn’t brush our coats properly. No; we’d rather marry a counter-jumper than go to the workhouse, Squeak and I.”

“And, after all, he mightn’t jump as much as you expected,” suggested Sapphira; “my experience is that gentlemen are never as gentlemanly nor cads as caddish as they ought to be; swells never swell nor bounders bound as much as one expects.”

“But I’ve always imagined that the correct thing was love in a cottage,” said Kate, turning her attention to the other dog; “just think of it, Bubble darling—a sweet little cottage, covered all the year round with yellow jasmine and scarlet Virginia creeper, and a real hero in it and no cats.”

Here the Countess chimed in. “I don’t care much for cottages: I never think the drains are satisfactory. And the creepers are always full of earwigs, my dear.”

“Mine wouldn’t be. The parlour-maid would sprinkle them with Keating’s powder every morning, and wash them with

carbolic soap once a week till they'd be as clean as my darling Bubble and Squeak. And I'm sure if a woman is so foolish as to marry at all, she ought to marry a man whom she believes to be absolutely perfect."

"But, my dear, she couldn't possibly believe him perfect after she was married to him, even if she did before."

"Since to know is *not* to believe," added Sapphira.

Kate laid her cheek caressingly against Bubble's head, and looked up at her mother with mischievous eyes. "I've always been taught that proper-minded girls indulged in harmless nightmares of being overgrown by briar roses and things till a fairy prince came and kissed them: and then of marrying him and living happy ever after."

"Oh! my dear, there are no such things nowadays as fairy princes. And even if there were, their marriages would be morganatic or something, and I always think those morganatic affairs are so unsatisfactory."

"A sort of apotheosis of poor relationships, Aunt Henrietta."

"Exactly," replied Lady Claverley, who did not know—and did not wish to know—what an apotheosis was. But she made it a rule always to agree with bad-tempered people—a rule which proved her ladyship's wisdom and saved her ladyship trouble.

But Lady Kate was still on mischief bent. "Mother, did you never dream dreams when you were young—insipid, idiotic, maidenly *comme-il-faut* dreams, with roses and music and sunshine and nonsense in them—and then find they came true in papa?"

"Good gracious, child, what an idea! As if any young girl would ever take the liberty of dreaming about such a person as your father—unless, of course, she had indigestion, and then there is no telling what she mightn't dream about. I remember once after eating lobster for supper at a county ball I dreamt that I was married to a bishop! And from that day to this I've never eaten lobster, nor allowed your father to do so; never once!"

“But why prevent uncle from eating what doesn't suit *you*? That seems a strange sort of logic.”

“It wouldn't, if you were a married woman, my dear. If you'd got a husband, you'd never let him eat anything that had ever made anybody ill, and not too much that hadn't. When things disagree with your husband it generally ends in his disagreeing with you. At least that's my experience.”

“Then, Aunt Henrietta, you compile uncle's culinary *Index Expurgatorius* quite as much for your own comfort as for his.”

“More so. Very early in my married life I learned that there was less chance of violent political discussion and bitter religious argument after semolina at lunch than after pastry and fancy sweets; so I gave orders that only plain puddings should be handed to your uncle, and fancy sweets to the visitors and me.”

“And he never found it out?”

“Of course not, my dear: how could he? He's a man. But it has made the afternoons much pleasanter for everybody concerned.”

Kate was still harping on her one string. “Didn't you make pictures in your own mind about your future husband, mother darling, long before you'd ever seen or heard of papa? Didn't you make up a sort of fancy-man, with eyes from one face and a mouth from another and a nose that was entirely your own invention?”

Lady Claverley leaned back in her chair, and turned over a page of the book upon her lap. It was Sunday: and her ladyship always made a point of keeping the Sabbath most strictly; this was part of a very excellent early training to which she loyally adhered, but which—with some unconscious humour—she modified and adapted to her natural desires and her modern uses. For instance, she talked as incessantly and as generally on Sunday as on any other day: but she always did so with an open Bible on her knee, the pages of which she turned over at intervals. This was her idea of searching the Scriptures. Further, she was very particular always to wear



black upon a Sunday ; she said she “ considered black a very religious colour.” Her beliefs might be old-fashioned, but, such as they were, she acted up to them. And which of the most modern and enlightened among us can do more than that ?

“ Well, my dear,” she replied, “ to tell you the truth, I did have silly ideas, when I was quite young, as to the sort of person I should marry when I grew up. I remember he always wore spurs. Spurs used to impress me very much when I was a girl, though I haven’t a notion why.”

“ Yes, yes, mother ; please go on. I understand why he wore spurs ; they suggest horses and hunting and battles and all sorts of brave and glorious and manly things.”

“ Well then, the first time your father wore spurs after we were married was when we went to a Court Ball ; and they became entangled in my lace flounce (it was lovely old Brussels-point that Aunt Silverhampton had given me as a wedding present), and tore it so dreadfully that he swore and I cried. And then I saw for myself how ridiculous all that dream-nonsense was, and how much better it would have been to marry a man who never wore anything more dangerous than elastic-sided boots.”

“ And wasn’t papa like the dream-man in any other respect ? ”

“ Not he ; and I wished he hadn’t been in that, as it turned out.”

“ An allegory on life in general and matrimony in particular,” said Sapphira ; “ there is nothing that convinces us of the folly of our wishes like the fulfilment of them.”

Kate pensively balanced a piece of cake on Bubble’s nose. “ All the same, if I meant to marry—which I don’t—I should think it much more fun to marry a man that I liked than a man that I didn’t.”

“ But, my dear, when once you are married, you can’t think how little it really matters whom you are married to. Lovers vary a bit, I confess ; but all husbands are practically the same—given, of course, that they are really nice people and properly brought up.” Lady Claverley always laid great stress on what

she called "a proper bringing up." According to her ideas, its fruits were shown in slavish obedience to parental prejudices, and in regular attendance of public worship every Sunday morning at eleven o'clock.

"Oh! mother, they can't be; men and women aren't tea-things, where any cup will do to go with any saucer. Now, for my part, if I had to be bothered with a husband at all, I should like an obliging and obedient sort of man, who was devoted to me and did all the things I wanted."

"He might be devoted to you—in fact, he'd be sure to be if he'd any taste or sense. But he wouldn't do any of the things you wanted; they never do; and then he'd try to make it up to you by doing all the things you didn't want."

"A truly masculine idea of compensation!" Sapphira muttered.

"For instance, when I first married your father he would write poetry to me, and pay me compliments, and do a lot of silly things like that that didn't please me in the least. I remember saying to him not long after our marriage, 'Claverley, I entirely excuse you from ever planting flowers on my grave, and you can marry again as soon as you like; but in the meantime I wish you'd try to be punctual for dinner, and wouldn't scold the servants before visitors.'"

"Oh! mother, how could you—and especially when he'd been so amiably foolish as to write poetry to you?"

"But, you see, he didn't write poetry to the servants—quite the reverse; and it was a waste of time to do it to me, as there was no fear of my giving notice."

"Well, I should like my husband to write poetry," said Kate: "I think it is so sweet and Shakespearean of a man to write odes to his mistress' eyebrow."

"Goodness gracious, child, what an idea! If there is one thing that bores me more than another, it is poetry. I never can see the use of saying things in a silly, roundabout sort of way, when it would be easier for you to say them straight out, and

far easier for other people to understand what you were driving at. I remember when we were engaged, your father would read aloud to me a tiresome, long-winded thing called *In Memoriam*, and I never could make head nor tail of it. Of course it was very sad for the poor young man to die—and abroad, too, where I don't expect he could get proper doctors. I daresay if he'd been taken ill in England, he'd have recovered. But I can't see that all that rigmarole about him mended matters much."

"I wonder you listened if it bored you so, Aunt Henrietta."

"I didn't; but I couldn't help hearing what the thing was about, though all the time I was thinking about my trousseau. But that is the worst of reading aloud; you can't help hearing bits, and it does disturb your thoughts whether you will or no."

"And there's another thing," continued Kate, regardless of her mother's frequent interruptions, "an ideal husband should have curly hair; because men with curly hair are always conceited, and it is so much easier to manage a man who is conceited than a man who isn't."

"Anything else?" her cousin asked.

"Oh! yes, lots of things. The correct and ideal husband should be sad and melancholy, and never cheerful or amusing. I hate funny men myself, and I think that melancholy ones are always rather interesting and mysterious. I really couldn't bear to have a husband who laughed at things."

"My dear, it'll be a comfort to you when he does laugh," said the Countess. "He won't always."

"But, mother darling, you must admit that from a dramatic point of view people are always more interesting when they cry than when they laugh."

"So they may be; but when husbands don't laugh they don't cry—they swear; and that isn't interesting at all."

"And he should have some secret source of sorrow and suffering. I believe that the orthodox hero of the common or garden girl always suffers in secret."

"The suffering won't be secret long, my dear; at least not if it's at all severe."

"Then the orthodox hero goes to the common or garden girl and tells her of it and asks for her love and sympathy to ease his anguish; and then he thanks her for them on his bended knee. I really know a lot about these things; I've studied them in the contemporary novel."

"He will be much more likely to ask her for a digestive tablet or a mustard leaf, and then to scold her violently if there aren't any in the house."

"And there must always be a sort of mysterious halo about the ideal husband," continued Katharine; "his wife must never thoroughly understand him."

"She never will," retorted the Countess. "She'll never understand as long as she lives how men can see as much and learn as little as they all do. I've been married for over thirty years, and I've never once missed being offended when your father scolded the railway officials because he was too late for a train. Yet to this day he'll storm at six porters, two guards, and a stationmaster for letting the train be punctual when he wasn't, and then come and ask me if I've got a headache, as I'm so quiet!"

"Yes, there'd be something highly fascinating and stimulating about a husband one couldn't understand," remarked Katharine.

"He would be almost as instructive as the acrostic or the puzzle column in a weekly paper," added her cousin.

"Well, you'll get one; you may make your mind easy on that score," the Countess replied. "All men are difficult to understand for the simple reason that they are so truthful."

"On the whole," said Sapphira, "there is nothing so misleading as the truth, and nothing so opaque as transparency."

Katharine pouted. "Listen to them, Bubble darling: they're talking about their own affairs and not attending to me a bit. Here am I giving them a most interesting lecture on

the ideal husband. Yet nobody attends to me but dear Bubble and Squeak!"

"Go on, then," said Sapphira, with a laugh; "let us hear more of the hero's perfections."

"Well, he ought to be tremendously strong and self-willed—a sort of combination of Samson Agonistes and Mr. Rochester; and his wife must always know he is master."

"Oh! my dear," exclaimed the Countess, "there is no necessity for her to know that: it will be quite sufficient if she can make *him* think it."

"And he ought to be very brave—something like Richard Cœur de Lion, don't you know?"

"Bless you, child! he'll be brave enough till he sneezes twice or his little finger begins to ache, and then he'll think it is all up with him, and his last hour is come. It'll be when *you* sneeze and when *your* little finger aches that he'll play the part of Richard What's-his-name."

Lady Kate rose slowly from the hearthrug and drew her slender figure to its full height. "And to think that I must give up my freedom for the sake of some horrid piece of wax-work such as this! It is hard on poor me!"

Her mother laughed cheerily. "Not at all, my dear! A married woman always has a better time than a single one. It is all very well to be single when you're young, but it gets dull as you grow older: and there's something very entertaining in looking out for your husband's mistakes and correcting them. It is one of the few amusements that never pall."

Kate sighed as she gazed at her graceful neck and pretty head in the mirror over the fireplace. "I am certain—absolutely certain—that I should hate the very sight of a husband," she said in a tone of profound resignation; "and that whatever he said or did would only make me loathe him more. And in that case I know I should find it a dreadful bore being married, and shouldn't get any fun out of it at all."

"Stuff and nonsense!" replied her mother "Why, my

dear, when I was a girl it was taken for granted that every woman loved her husband: it never occurred to anybody to do anything else."

Sapphira shrugged her shoulders. "The range of feminine thought has apparently widened since then."

"People never take things for granted, as they used to do when I was young," continued Lady Claverley in an injured tone; "women now think it as great a favour and as big an effort to love their own husbands and children as they used to think it to love their enemies and to be civil to the opposing candidate at a county election."

"It is the same in the religious world," said Sapphira: "nothing is taken for granted even there."

"You are quite right, my dear; and that is worse than anything. Why, when I was a girl everybody belonged to the Church of England because it was the Church of England; that was reason enough for anybody—for anybody that was anybody, I mean. It would have been considered positively indelicate for a woman—and especially a young woman—to attempt to think out such things for herself."

"But nowadays every minx of eighteen has invented some special interpretation of the Athanasian Creed, Aunt Henrietta: and by twenty she has compiled and edited a new set of Commandments—less brittle and more mendable than the originals."

The Countess sighed. "That is so: and—as I said before—there is something indelicate to my mind in young women prying into Creeds and Commandments and things like that. I'm sure poor dear mamma wouldn't have approved of it, nor of any fancy religions. I don't like fancy religions myself: they weren't the fashion in my young days, though I must say I wish that orthodox religion wasn't so draughty, and didn't give one cold. I never enter a church that isn't over-ventilated, so that it generally takes me three weeks to go to church—one Sunday to go, and a fortnight to get rid of the cold in my head which is a necessary part of the service."

"Poor mother!" said Kate, with a laugh; "you seem to worship under persecution, like the early Christians."

"I do: and I confess I am not surprised that the Jews were a stiff-necked generation, if their places of worship were anything like ours. To be quite candid, I believe that fancy religions are warmer—though, of course, wickeder—than true ones. But one queer thing I've noticed is that people who belong to fancy religions are always fond of nuts."

"Why nuts, Aunt Henrietta?" inquired Sapphira.

"I haven't a notion why; I only know that they are. Whenever I see people eating nuts I always doubt their orthodoxy. They seem to be encouraging Darwin, and all those dreadful men who pretend that we are descended from monkeys. I cannot consider that nuts are Christian food. I'd as soon eat grass, as Nebuchadnezzar did when he was out of office."

But Sapphira was inclined to argue. "Quite nice men eat walnuts," she said.

"Well, all I can say is, that if they do, they won't be nice long; for there is nothing so upsetting to the digestion as walnuts, and nothing so upsetting to the temper as the digestion. It is not the slightest use telling a man to love his wife and not be bitter against her, as long as you allow him to eat walnuts: because it isn't in human nature that he can obey you."

Kate waltzed across the room, the dogs jumping after her with yelps of delight. "Come along, Sapphira, and let us take these two darlings for a run, or else they'll get fat on too much cake and too little exercise, poor dears! And there's nothing in the world so bad as fatness. As long as I live I shall never cease to sing psalms of joy because I'm thin; at least, that is to say as long as I am thin; and I hope I shall be dead and buried ages before I get stout."

And she danced out of the room, followed by the dogs and Sapphira.

## CHAPTER III

### LADYHALL

IN the lowlands of Scotland, not far from the east coast, lies the village of Dunbrae, consisting of a single street of grey stone cottages, which toils painfully up a steep hill crowned by an ancient church. A muddy street—a street with deep ruts—a street with occasional stretches of cobbles—a street wherein the wayfaring man, especially if he ride a bicycle, may and occasionally does err. At such times he is surrounded by a rapturous crowd of bare-legged urchins, who in the broadest Scotch offer him such consolation as is usually bestowed by the cynical caddy on the unfortunate wight who fozzles his stroke at golf.

The church is a superb relic of ancient times. The nave and aisles have been restored; but externally it looks much as it must have done centuries ago. Inside, indeed, everything is changed. There was once a rood-screen, dividing nave from chancel, through which could be discerned the lights on the high altar, lights which made the mysterious darkness of the lofty roof still more mysterious, and which bore daily witness to the Light of the World. No altar now decks the sanctuary; the rood-screen, crowned with the symbol of the faith, is replaced by a wooden partition, which cuts off the chancel from the nave. In front is the pulpit, from which the minister either deduces what lessons he can from the stories of the Old Testament and the Gospel of the New, or else (as one of his parishioners put it) “exposes a psalm.”



But the glory of the church is the chancel, with its superb Norman arches and magnificent windows, with its stone monuments and graven brasses bearing their lasting testimony to the virtues of those men and women who did justly and loved mercy and walked humbly with their God in the far-off days of civil warfare and religious persecution. It is now used as a vestry and lumber-room; and where once stood the altar may now be found the pail and mop of the caretaker. But nothing can mar the chaste dignity of the ancient fane. The imagination can overpass the squalid accidents; it can fill chancel, nave, and aisle with the stately accompaniments of a dignified ritual, and can hear the pealing organ and the plaintive chant of the thronging worshippers.

About a mile from the village stood Ladyhall, the abode of Lord Claverley's kinswoman. When the late Mr. MacBalloch bought the Hall it was a picturesque ruin. But it had been carefully and completely rebuilt under the supervision of a skilful architect, who, with youth and enthusiasm to back up perfect taste and profound study, spared no labour, as Mr. MacBalloch spared no money, in restoring the Hall not only to its pristine splendour, but as nearly as possible to its former style. Modern comforts no doubt abounded, which would have astonished those who built and lived in the mansion long centuries ago. But so far as outward appearance and internal arrangement went, the Hall was very much what it had originally been. Externally it had more the look of a French château than of a Scotch castle. It consisted of two parts—one large, one much smaller—united only by a wall, so that he who would pass from one to the other had to go out into the open air. In the middle of this wall was the entrance gate; facing it an old well and a sundial. To the left, as one entered, was the door leading to the main building. This opened into a huge hall, with a large open fireplace; around it were oak settles and plain wooden benches. One end was partitioned off by an open screen, beautifully carved,

and served for the dining-room. Out of this hall led winding staircases, on which the bewildered stranger had no difficulty in losing his way. He might, perchance, find himself in a lovely drawing-room, hung with priceless tapestry; or it might be that the door he opened led into a superb ballroom, where walls and ceilings were painted and covered with strange devices and startling mottoes, some hospitable, some pathetic, and some frankly cynical; or he might find himself in one of the numerous bed-chambers, small but cosy, some with unexpected dressing-rooms, or maybe an oratory. All the rooms had two or three steps inside the doors, ascending or descending, as the case might be, but so arranged that the unwary traveller was bound to tumble upstairs or downstairs with unfailing precision. From the top of the house there was a fine view reaching to the sea, and in the far distance might be seen the grey towers of an ancient and beautiful city.

A house with a strange charm, a wonderful fascination; redolent of old-time memories and the fashion of an elder day, yet replete with every modern comfort. There was a garden, too, where Mary Stuart might have walked—and very possibly did walk—with Darnley, what time her infatuation for the handsome scamp lasted. Like ancient Gaul, according to Cæsar, it was divided into three parts. One was an old-fashioned Dutch garden, with avenues of trees cut into strange shapes, bearing resemblance to all kinds of most fearful wild-fowl; another was an exquisite rosary, carpeted with turf which had been rolled for as many centuries as the famous lawns of Oxford; in the third might be found an ancient wall of great solidity covered in due season with luscious peaches, while in front of it stretched a bed of delicious fruits, blushing like so many duchesses beneath their strawberry leaves.

Here lived the widow of Sandy MacBalloch, a canny Scot, who, from small beginnings, had made a large fortune as an ironmaster. A proud man was Sandy when Katharine Clare,

cousin of the Earl of Claverley, consented to share his hearth and home ; a resigned man was Sandy six months later. He was a capable man, who ruled his workpeople with a strong, but just hand. Yet a short experience of married life had taught him that he who has married a woman with a will and a temper of her own, had, if he be a lover of peace, better suppress his own wishes and opinions until he has ascertained the views of his better-half. Mrs. MacBalloch always piqued herself on the strict fulfilment of her marriage vow of obedience, and it is certain she could do so with justice ; for after one experience which gave rise to memories of some bitterness, Sandy with much wisdom refrained from giving her any opportunity of a conflict between inclination and duty. This led to a life, if not of domestic happiness, at least of domestic tranquillity. The authority which Mr. MacBalloch felt it inadvisable to exercise within his household, he exerted in the complete restoration of Ladyhall, which he had recently purchased. He only lived long enough to see his ambition in this respect fully gratified, and then he slept with his fathers. No child had blessed the marriage ; and Mrs. MacBalloch, who was her husband's junior by thirty years, found herself richly left. Sandy's Will was what the most exacting of widows would have wished ; there was no irritating restriction as regards a second marriage. Indeed, with the exception of a few inconsiderable legacies, the whole of his large fortune passed without reservation into Mrs. MacBalloch's possession. She had now been many years a widow, and had never displayed the slightest desire to avail herself of the liberty of remarriage. She was tall and slim ; her nose was hooked, and a keen eye glittered beneath bushy eyebrows still black. In her youth she had enjoyed no inconsiderable share of beauty, and she was still—at the age of fifty—an extremely handsome woman.

For years she had suffered from weak health ; what her particular complaint was no one knew. Whatever it was, her

indomitable will prevailed over the feebleness of her frame, and though pronounced by the faculty not once, nor twice, at the point of dissolution, she invariably disappointed their predictions.

There was not very much intercourse between the Earl's family and his kinswoman when Lady Kate appeared upon the scene to be at once the plague and idol of her father. Then Mrs. MacBalloch had been asked, and had not ungraciously consented, to become her godmother. A handsome present, repeated yearly, had been the outcome. There was an occasional visit of a few days' duration. Mrs. MacBalloch was not averse to her godchild—indeed she treated her with kindness, and rather petted her when they met. But Kate had a temper of her own; and as she grew in years her visits to her godmother were sometimes accompanied by storms. The girl would fiercely rebel against the elder woman's dictatorial ways; she would even resent being petted. As a result for some years the visits had been discontinued. Still there were observers who said that if there were a soft place in Mrs. MacBalloch's heart, it was for her lovely and self-willed god-daughter, who was a replica of what she herself had been when she likewise was a Katharine Clare.

There was another person who had been the recipient of not a little kindness from the owner of Ladyhall. Richard Despard had been a favourite cousin of Mrs. MacBalloch; indeed, there were some who averred that he would not have been averse to a closer connection. However this may be, Richard finally married another woman, who died, leaving him a handsome boy. Richard did not long survive his loss; and George Despard at a tender age was left an orphan. Whether it was a remembrance of an old love, or whether it was simple, if unwonted, kindness of heart, the fact remains that Mrs. MacBalloch took charge of the boy, superintended his education, and when he arrived at years of discretion made him her secretary and business agent with an adequate salary. He was

given clearly to understand that this was the limit of her beneficence; he was not to look for inheritance. From his boyhood his patroness had treated him not unkindly, but without tenderness or affection; and if her hand had bestowed benefits, as it undoubtedly had, yet there was an absence of graciousness which robbed the gifts of half their virtue, and left with the recipient a bitter taste. George Despard, however, was deeply sensible of Mrs. MacBalloch's real kindness, and of all that she had done for him when he was a lonely and penniless orphan. Bitter at heart as he was at times, he had a keen sense of the obligations under which he had been placed. And it was this which induced him to accept a position which was not one in which his abilities could have a proper field, or in which his natural ambition could ever find an opening. It was an added pain to him that, now he was a man, Mrs. MacBalloch treated him with less consideration than heretofore. He was her dependant, but he did not now share the immunity of her servants from the shafts of her ridicule and the venom of her sarcasm. In enduring this, he felt he was but repaying all that she had done for him in the past years; and, however sore the trial, was never drawn into a loss of temper, nor goaded into a retort.

He was a handsome man, tall, with dark hair and a straight nose. He was careful of his appearance and was always well dressed. He was a notable golfer, yet apparently sane; a keen angler, and he could ride a horse as well as another. A considerable part of his duties had to be carried on in the open air, with a result that he had a well-knit athletic frame, and a splendid complexion brown with health and sea-breezes. Withal, his abilities were above the common. Thanks to Mrs. MacBalloch, he had received an admirable education, and had fully profited thereby. As a boy he had worked well; as a man he had plenty of leisure, and, since he saw little society, he devoted his spare time to reading and to literature. Consequently he had a trained intellect, a mind well stored with the

products of a reading which if not profound was at least wide, and the power of expressing his ideas in happily chosen phrases.

So time went on until George Despard found himself eight-and-twenty years old with no especial prospects. Gratitude for her care for him as a child made it impossible, he felt, to give up his post as long as Mrs. MacBalloch lived and needed him. Yet it was difficult for him to see what was to be his future when she died. Thus it happened that reasonably contented, if not happy in his present position, there hung over him a cloud—not only in the sense of a dependent position under a domineering patroness, but the shadow of an uncertain future and of unfulfilled hopes. This lent a touch of gravity to a disposition naturally cheerful, and a subacid flavour to a humour which was at bottom genial.

One brilliant morning in August Mrs. MacBalloch and George were breakfasting in a cheerful room opening out on to the rose garden. The post-bag had just been brought in, and each was studying with more or less interest a share of its contents. Truth to tell, George's interest was but languid, as his pile of letters was entirely of a business character, so they were put aside to be dealt with later on; and he took up the day before yesterday's *Globe*, and noted with some satisfaction that Surrey was running up a big score against Yorkshire. Meanwhile Mrs. MacBalloch, having finished her correspondence, was apparently lost in thought. She sat sipping her tea at intervals, with her dark eyebrows knitted together, and occasionally looked at George, who was now deep in the capital performance of Kent against an apparently invincible Australian team, which formed the principal attraction of the Canterbury week.

"Did I tell you, George," began Mrs. MacBalloch, "that I had invited Kate Claverley to spend a month at Ladyhall?"

George laid down the *Globe*.

"Lady Kate? No, Mrs. MacBalloch, I don't think you have mentioned it."

"Well, I have."

"She will refuse, I suppose," said George carelessly.

"And why do you suppose?" asked Mrs. MacBalloch sharply.

"Well, she has not been here for some six years; and the last time she came, if I remember right, you and she did not get on particularly well together."

"If she has not been here, as is certainly the case, it is probably because she has not been invited. As you say, we did not get on very well; she did not behave at all nicely, and displayed temper on more than one occasion."

"No doubt, no doubt," said George negligently, as he took up his newspaper again.

"I suppose you mean by that, that it was I who showed temper," said Mrs. MacBalloch angrily.

Despard smiled.

"I wish, George," she went on, "that you would do me the honour to pay some regard to me when I am speaking, instead of reading a newspaper."

"I beg your pardon. I did not know there was anything you wished to discuss. I am all attention."

"Thank you. I wish you to take note of such arrangements as are necessary. Lady Kate, when she was here, certainly showed that she had inherited a good deal of her father's temper; but she is six years older, and, we will hope, six years wiser. It may be she has learnt to exercise some self-restraint."

"We will hope so," said George politely, as Mrs. MacBalloch paused.

"And if not, it may be of service to her to stay for a time with one who has her welfare at heart, and who will not give way to her whims and fancies, as I am afraid her poor mother does."

Mrs. MacBalloch again paused, as if she expected Despard to speak. He was at a loss what to say, so he took refuge in the safe, if not original, remark, "Exactly."

“You know, George, I have undertaken solemn responsibilities with regard to my goddaughter; and when I have undertaken a responsibility I always endeavour to discharge it to the best of my ability.” Mrs. MacBalloch drew herself up as she uttered these noble sentiments. George was a little surprised, as Mrs. MacBalloch had not hitherto shown any especial appreciation of the duties of a godmother, except in so far as boxing the child’s ears and sending her to bed on divers occasions and oft were concerned.

“I know that in my case,” he said, with some feeling, “you treated me with generosity and kindness, though I had no claim whatsoever upon you.”

“Yes, yes, we won’t speak of that,” said his patroness hastily. “Let us come back to the matter in hand. It has occurred to me that, as I am getting on in life, I should like all differences there may have been between my cousin’s family and myself to be smoothed over. So I have invited the Earl and Countess to come with their daughter.”

“And you think they will agree to come?” asked George, with some curiosity. He knew that there had been a good deal of friction between Lord Claverley and his kinswoman; it seemed not a little strange that the invitation should have been given, and he thought it would be stranger still if it were accepted.

“I have little doubt they will. Between you and me, I think they will be glad to have a month away from Claverley Castle without expense. I hear that the financial state of affairs there is unsatisfactory.”

Despard began now to have some glimmering of light on the matter; but he wisely kept his thoughts to himself. He remarked vaguely, “If only the weather keeps as fine as it has been of late, it will certainly be very pleasant here.”

There was a silence for a minute or two, and then Mrs. MacBalloch said, “You will make the necessary arrangements for their reception?”



"Certainly."

"I shall not have anybody else staying in the house if they come, as I want to become as intimate as possible with my relations. I think kinsfolk should always be friends."

"Still, intimacy and friendship are by no means the same thing," said George drily: "in fact, frequently actually opposing ones."

"That may be. But I shall do what I think right; and if that stuck-up old nincompoop, my cousin Claverley, chooses to quarrel with me—well, then, he can! At any rate, I shall have done my duty."

"Towards getting up a quarrel, do you mean?"

"No, towards preventing one."

George smiled, but did not speak.

"You always get to know people well when you are *en famille*," continued Mrs. MacBalloch.

"You do: in fact, sometimes almost too well."

Mrs. MacBalloch rose from the table and slowly walked to the window. Then she paused, and glanced dubiously at Despard, who had also risen. As she did not speak George said, "Have you any further instructions?"

The lady again looked at him, but said nothing. George was quietly withdrawing, and had reached the door, when she, apparently making up her mind, called out:

"Stay a minute, George, there *is* something more that I wish to say."

"Certainly, Mrs. MacBalloch—what is it?"

Mrs. MacBalloch again looked at George, much as if he were a prize ox.

"You are a good-looking fellow, George," she said slowly: "at least, so they tell me. I must admit I can't see it myself."

George laughed cheerfully.

"I daresay I shall pass in a crowd."

"Lady Kate also is very handsome," went on Mrs. MacBalloch slowly, and with some significance.

Despard was quick in his apprehension : he felt at once the subtle suggestion, and flushed hotly.

“So I have been told,” he answered haughtily : “but I confess I do not see what that has to do with the present discussion.”

“It is best to speak plainly, so that there may be no misunderstandings in the future. Remember, then, that it will never do for you to make love to my goddaughter.”

“Mrs. MacBalloch,” cried Despard indignantly, “because you have been kind to me in the past you have no right to insult me, or to throw my dependent position in my teeth.”

“Tut, tut, George,” replied Mrs. MacBalloch good-humouredly, “there’s no need for you to get excited. I never mentioned your position.”

“No, but you insinuated——”

“There, there ; that will do. I like you well enough ; and in pure kindness I warn you not to burn your fingers.”

“I understand,” said George bitterly : “Lady Kate is a fine lady, and I am a poor gentleman. I daresay you mean to be kind : anyway, your warning shall not be wasted.”

“You are not a bad fellow, George,” said Mrs. MacBalloch, still in high good humour, as she left the room : “but at times you really are very silly.”

If George muttered an expletive or two beneath his breath, we need not be surprised : for he was by no means more perfect than the rest of us, and not unhasty in his temper. But perhaps after all he was merely calling down blessings on the head of his benefactress : in which case his moderation is worthy of all honour.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE INVITATION

“WE must devote ourselves this morning,” said Lord Claverley sententiously to his wife and daughter, “to the discussion of the invitation received to-day from Katharine MacBalloch for us three to sojourn for a month under her hospitable roof. It is a matter which requires serious consideration.”

Now serious consideration was a thing which the soul of Lord Claverley loved. He was never happier than when he had assembled his wife and daughter in his own special sanctum to talk over for a couple of hours some trivial question which could easily have been settled in five minutes. His wife considered this very fussy—as indeed it was—but she endured it as a necessity entailed by her marriage vow ; while Lady Kate was so intolerant of the whole proceeding that she discoursed sweet music under her breath all the time.

“There are many points to be considered,” continued the Earl, marking off those points upon his taper fingers : “first, whether it is wise to accept ; secondly, whether it is desirable ; and, thirdly, whether we should do well to accept *in toto* as invited, or whether Kate alone should go, unhampered by parental influence.”

“All that we’ve got to consider,” said the Countess, “is what we want to do, and then to do it. I can’t see the use of talking in a circle all your days. It makes me dizzy.”

“Alas ! my love, you are ever too prompt both in thought and action.”

“Well, you are not ; so we strike an average between us.”

“Nevertheless, Henrietta, it is a mistake, believe me, to be too hasty—a mistake to which you must allow me to say you are somewhat prone. You have a most sound and admirable judgment when once you have mastered a situation ; but your temptation is to pass sentence in a case before you have duly assimilated the evidence. You do not—you cannot—know all the ins and outs of a question—all the pro and cons—all the modifying circumstances—by instinct.”

“I don’t want to. I know my own mind, and that’s quite enough for me.”

Her husband’s habit of making mountains out of molehills, and then setting about to climb them with alpenstocks, was always trying to Lady Claverley.

As for Kate, she was so irritated that she was humming straight through *Judas Maccabæus*.

“It appears to me,” said the Earl, “that there cannot be two opinions as to the desirability of Kate’s accepting this invitation—an invitation couched, I must admit, in most agreeable terms. I never knew Katharine MacBalloch so gracious before : did you, my love?”

“Never. I wonder what she wants out of us.”

“Oh ! my love, my love, let me beg of you to strangle such uncharitable thoughts ere they see the light.”

“I’m not uncharitable, Claverley. But when people suddenly become what you know they are not, you can feel sure they aren’t doing it for nothing. Whenever you see anything out of the common—even a chair in an unusual place, or a door open that ought to be shut—you always know there is something behind it. If you’ve any sense, you try to find out what that something is ; and if you happen to be a woman, you generally succeed.”

“But, my dear Henrietta, it is impossible to judge actions without a complete knowledge of the motives which prompted them.”

"Oh, Claverley, as if I'd the time to bother about motives! I know that certain things are done—and that generally I've got to undo them—and as a rule that is as much as I can manage. And besides if I did know the motives, as you call them, it wouldn't make any difference to me. Everybody has some sort of a reason for doing a silly thing, and the reason is usually even sillier than the thing itself."

Lord Claverley never condescended to argue with his wife. He said she could not grasp the soundness of his reasoning nor the subtlety of his finesse. Wherein he was quite correct.

"Well, Henrietta, you will admit that it is desirable—most desirable in the face of our present circumstances—that Kate should enter into friendly relations with her kinswoman, Mrs. MacBalloch."

"It is always desirable for young people to make all the friends they can and to keep all the friends they can. They never know when they may want them."

"Certainly, my love, certainly. What a clear way you have of putting things—quite a gift of translucent speech! Therefore we agree that it is a consummation devoutly to be wished that our daughter should endear herself to Katharine MacBalloch; and is not a visit to Ladyhall the very opportunity for cementing this desirable friendship?"

Lady Claverley looked at her daughter. "That depends," she said, "upon Kate herself."

Kate, who was at that moment engaged in a pianissimo rendering of *When Mighty Kings*, did not speak.

"And the question now to be considered is" her father continued, "whether in the absence or in the presence of her parents Kate will be the more likely to enshrine herself in the lonely heart of Katharine MacBalloch."

"If Kate makes herself pleasant, Mrs. MacBalloch will like her, and if Kate doesn't make herself pleasant, neither Mrs. MacBalloch nor anybody else will like her. It is in her own hands; and it won't make any difference whether she goes

visiting by herself or takes all her ancestors since the days of Adam with her."

Then at last Kate gave tongue. "I'm not going truckling to anybody for the sake of money, papa, and so I tell you straight out. Nothing would induce me, and it's no good asking me."

"Oh! my dear," remonstrated her mother, "remember whom you are speaking to."

"I am remembering."

"Two—four—six—eight—ten—twenty—twenty-five," said Lady Claverley, counting the stitches on her knitting-needles. "Claverley, how much does three times twenty-five come to?"

"Seventy-five exactly, my love."

"How clever it is of you to add up things so quickly in your head! I never can imagine how you do it."

Lady Claverley was one of those women who are never idle. With ceaseless energy her fingers were for ever transforming Scotch wool or unbleached calico into useful and unlovely garments for the poor and needy. The only advantage, as far as she could see, of a long conversation with her husband was that it enabled her to get on with her knitting.

"I repeat," said the Earl, "my question: Would it be better for Katharine to go alone to Ladyhall, or for us, her parents, to accompany her? The matter requires careful consideration—very careful consideration."

Kate hummed *Sound an Alarm*, but made no further reply; and her mother was too much engrossed in the intricacies of her heel to attend to minor matters, so Lord Claverley continued without interruption:

"I always think that young persons are more unaffected and spontaneous—more simple in, fact, and therefore more attractive—when their parents are absent. Yet, on the other hand, it is but natural, perhaps, that we elders should consider that our presence—weighted as it is by the influence of years and experience—makes for peace and order and wise-dealing."

“Yes, Claverley, *I* certainly do feel like that; but I don't see why *you* should.”

A shade of annoyance passed over the Earl's aristocratic features. “My love, you forget that I am many years older than you are.”

“No, I don't; but I've learnt double the quantity in half the time. And then I always know what to say.”

“Which, I conclude, I do not.” Lord Claverley was still nettled.

“Five—ten—fifteen—twenty. What did you say half of seventy-five was, Claverley?”

“I have never to my knowledge given an opinion on the point; but as a matter of fact it is thirty-seven and a half.”

“It can't be; because I can't possibly cut a stitch into halves.”

“Nevertheless it is.”

Lady Claverley looked reproachful. “Well, it never was before, I'm quite sure of that. I've knitted socks scores and scores of times, and I've never yet had anything so impossible to deal with as thirty-seven and a half. Think again, Claverley; there must be another half of seventy-five.”

“My love, I regret to say that there is not.”

The Countess's handsome face grew positively despairing, as she dropped her knitting on her lap. “Then what on earth am I to do? I've got seventy-five stitches on my needles altogether, and I must divide them into two equal parts for the heel; yet your own sense must tell you that I can't possibly split the wool, and make two half-stitches out of one whole.”

“Supposing that you put thirty-seven stitches on one needle and thirty-eight on another. That would divide the whole into two practically equal parts and yet leave it seventy-five,” suggested her husband kindly.

“And are you sure that thirty-seven and thirty-eight make seventy-five?”

"Absolutely certain."

"Then that'll do beautifully. Oh, Claverley, what a clever man you are! I should never have thought of that myself. Ten—twenty—thirty—thirty-seven."

"But, mother, how have you always managed before? You've knitted hundreds of socks, and never got into this difficulty." It was a noteworthy fact that other people—including her own husband and daughter—were always interested in anything, however trifling, that concerned Lady Claverley. She possessed that indefinable attribute for which we have as yet no better name than *personality*.

"Well, the fact is, Kate, that I've always put on seventy-four stitches before, which divided so nicely into two thirty-sevens. But I've somehow made another stitch this time—goodness knows how!—and I can't be bothered to go back and find it out."

The Earl recalled his wandering sheep. "But what about Mrs. MacBalloch's invitation?"

"Well, papa, I've told you that nothing on earth will induce me to truckle to that woman for her money. I'd sooner grind a barrel-organ or marry a crossing-sweeper."

"But the other day, if my memory serves me, you declined with equal firmness to marry the crossing-sweeper or his equivalent."

"So I did, and so I shall."

"Then the old place must go—as I have said before, there is no other alternative."

Kate's only reply was a bar of *See the Conquering Hero*.

"The old place—the home of my ancestors since the days of the Crusaders—must be knocked down by the blasphemous hammer of the intrusive auctioneer," repeated the Earl, with a break in his voice.

Kate wavered a little. Claverley Castle was very dear to her. But all she said was, "Nothing on earth will induce me to go and stay at Ladyhall."



"Then you are a very ungrateful as well as a very undutiful daughter." Her father's face was stern.

"I don't care what I am. All I know is that I won't be the guest of that strict, stern, severe Mrs. MacBalloch, and be ordered about as if I am a child."

"But I say you shall."

"And I say I shan't."

"Come, come," said Lady Claverley, "what's all this fuss about? Of course we shall all three go together to stay with Katharine MacBalloch at the time for which she asks us. I'm sure it will be very nice and we shall all enjoy it. And it will do me a world of good; for what with Charles and poverty and one thing and another, I've had a deal of bother lately, and I want a bit of change and diversion." This last was a master-stroke—and she knew it.

Kate wavered more visibly; she adored her mother. "Of course, mother darling, if you really think it would do *you* good and that *you* need a change——"

"I'm sure I do. Poor dear mamma always said that when you were wearied there was nothing like an entire change of air and scene; and she was right. It would be a treat to me to eat a dinner that I hadn't written out beforehand on a slate; and to have it handed round by servants whose tempers I hadn't to consider."

But the Earl scented danger. "Understand me, Henrietta, if I do decide to go to Scotland, nothing on earth will induce me to stay with Dunbar. I repeat it; nothing under heaven will induce me to visit your brother just now."

His wife soothed him instantly. "Certainly not, my dear; who ever thought of such a thing? Nobody has asked you to go to Dunbar's—not even Dunbar himself. It is your side of the family that we are going to visit now—not mine."

"It is not that your brother and I are not good friends at a distance—we are. But I feel that in the present precarious state of my affairs, and with all the anxiety that it entails,

Dunbar's high spirits—and his wife's incessant chatter—would be more than I could bear."

"Of course it would, my love, and nobody should ask you to bear it," replied the devoted wife.

"Then that decides it, Henrietta," said Lord Claverley, with a gracious wave of the hand; "in this house you are—and always will be, as long as I am master—the first consideration. We will all three repair to Mrs. MacBalloch's at the time mentioned in her letter; and we shall all, I hope—and especially you, my love—derive benefit from the change."

"Two — four — six — eight — ten. The leg looks rather straight; but I never decrease below the calf in charity socks—I don't think it necessary." Lady Claverley had a very nice sense of social distinctions.

"Well, my dear Henrietta and Katharine, I think it is very satisfactory—very satisfactory indeed—that we have arrived at so definite a conclusion after a discussion of only half an hour," said the Earl.

His wife had arrived there before the discussion began; but she did not think it necessary to say so.

"All the same, I expect I shall hate it," sighed Kate, locking her arm in her mother's as they left the room together.

"Oh, my dear, that's silly talk! You'll enjoy it very much, and so we all shall. I confess I don't care much for Katharine MacBalloch myself—she is too overbearing and domineering for me, and too fond of giving her opinions on matters that don't concern her; but you never need see much of people in their own houses if you don't want to. And I shall take Sapphira with us: she will be company for you."

"But papa has set me against it by all the things he has said. If only he'd left me alone, I should have agreed to go right enough; but now I'm prejudiced against the whole thing." Kate's anger had died down into a sense of injury.

"My dear child, how foolish to take any notice of what

your father says! I should have thought you knew him well enough by this time."

"His way of dealing with things always sets my back up; he has a knack of making me angrier than anybody I know," grumbled Kate.

"My dear, that is because you are so like him; you should always leave me to manage him instead of trying to deal with him direct. That's where you make a mistake. If you want him to say a thing, just tell me so quietly, and I'll get him to say it. But when you speak to him yourself, he generally says the opposite from what you want; and then not even I can get him to unsay what he has once said."

Kate bowed before her mother's higher wisdom. "All right, mother; but you must admit he is trying at times."

"Not at all, my dear," replied Lady Claverley loyally; "your father is a most excellent and honourable and upright man—an ideal English landowner—and I am always guided by his superior judgment, in small matters as well as great, as a true wife ought to be. But I must admit I sometimes wish he'd manage his own affairs, and leave me to manage mine."

"Then do you really think that papa is a clever man?" There was a ring of doubt in Kate's voice. Her mother looked amazed that anybody should need to ask such a question.

"Of course I do—a wonderfully clever man—quite one of the cleverest men I ever met. There is hardly anything that he doesn't know something about, and on which his opinion isn't worth having; and I am sure that anybody with whom he is brought into contact is the better for his counsel and advice. But all the same, my dear, if I were you I wouldn't mention to him that I was going to do things till after I'd done them. I never do; and I'm sure it's the best way."

"Yes, mother, I know what you mean; he might forbid them."

“He’d be sure to, and then stick to what he’d said through thick and thin, just because he had said it. Men are all like that.”

“And it is better not to give him reasons for things either—I mean reasons why you want to do things and why you don’t.”

“Certainly not; never give a man a reason for anything—at least, never the real one. I learnt that lesson a great many years ago. They’ve got a horrid way of arguing and proving that your reason isn’t any reason at all. As if that had anything to do with it! And now I must go and write some letters and see Brown. These discussions of your father do waste such a lot of valuable time, and they never affect the actual course of events at all. I always know what the ultimate decision will be before he begins to speak.” She did not add that the ultimate decision was invariably her own dressed up to look like the Earl’s; probably she was not even aware of the fact.

Lady Kate then repaired to the room still known as the nursery, where her late nurse—now her present maid—sewed unceasingly upon her ladyship’s behalf.

Mrs. Tiffany (the Mrs. was merely a courtesy title) was what is known in the servants’ hall as “a character.” When Lady Claverley had a little daughter, having been married for a dozen years without any children at all, she naturally had no experience in the upbringing of them; so she wisely set about finding a capable and experienced nurse, on whose knowledge she might rely when her own was lacking. Mrs. Tiffany exactly fulfilled this desire. She had lived for over twenty years with a wealthy family of the name of Hopkins, and had successfully brought up five young Hopkinses to respective manhood and womanhood; and now—having launched these several barks triumphantly on the sea of life—she was prepared for fresh worlds to conquer in the shape of the little Lady Katharine Clare.

She was as careful and devoted a nurse to her charge as the fondest mother could have wished, and she abundantly fulfilled all Lady Claverley's hopes and Mrs. Hopkins' recommendations; but—as is often the way in such cases—her heart was with the employers of her youth. According to Tiffany, there was no trial which the young Hopkinses had not endured, no feat which they had not accomplished. Everything that other people did or suffered had been equalled—nay, surpassed—by the phalanx she always referred to by the names of Misannie, Misemmie, Miscarry, Mastrennery, and Mastrerbert.

Kate's childhood had been enlivened and her young imagination fired by Tiffany's reminiscences of this redoubtable family. They provided a sort of interminable epic, which she was never tired of hearing, nor her nurse of reciting. Even now, when she was no longer a child but a woman, and Tiffany no longer a nurse but a maid, the Hopkinses were not as other men, but still had a romance and an interest peculiarly their own; though it must be admitted that Kate now and again laughed slyly in her sleeve at the traditions clustering round this legendary race—legends which in her younger days she had accepted as gospel.

Above this group of godlike mortals there ruled a beneficent and presiding power spoken of by Tiffany as Missisopkins. But this superior and gracious being played but an unimportant part in the narrations concerning her heroic brood; she was generally introduced by the reciter of the epic rather for the pointing of the moral than for the adornment of the tale.

Mrs. Tiffany prided herself on her precision of diction and her general culture. She was much addicted to quotations and metaphors; and she adapted these to the case in point, on the same principle as the old woman, who, when she read the Bible to her husband, "put in many a bit for his good." Also she never used a word of two syllables where one of three would do.

"Oh, Tiffy," sighed Lady Kate, flinging herself with a groan upon the old nursery sofa, "what do you think? I've got to go and spend a whole month with a fearfully strict woman in Scotland, on the off-chance that she will die and leave me her money."

"Never mind, my lammie, Scotland is a most historical and instructive country, and highly improving to the mind. It was there, I remember, that Mastrennery caught pleuritis by wetting his feet in a nasty, damp river."

"And didn't he catch any fish as well?"

"Yes, lovey, boatloads and boatloads of them. He was quite what you call a cracked sportsman was Mastrennery."

Kate's brown eyes twinkled. "How clever of him—and especially as he was so musical as well!"

Tiffany looked at her young mistress in sorrow rather than in anger. "Oh, my lady, what a memory you have got! How often must I impress upon you that it was Mastrerbert that played the piano and Mastrennery that bit his nails?"

"Of course it was, nurse; how stupid of me to forget! But I am sure there was something else that Henry did besides biting his nails."

"You are thinking of his scholarship. He was great at the first-classics was Mastrennery. Latin wasn't Greek to him, as it would be to you and me, my lady: he'd read it as easy as wink."

"I remember now quite well. It was Herbert who played and sang so beautifully."

"He did, my lady—as sweet as a syrupim. At one time there was some talk of him joining the church choir like any processional singer, but his mamma couldn't abide the notion. And as for Misannie—why, I've often heard Missisopkins say that if only Misannie had been properly trained at the Conservatory in Paris she'd have been a regular Greasy."

"Then why didn't they train her?" asked Lady Kate. "Grisis don't grow on every bush."

Tiffany looked shocked. "Oh! my lady, how can you suggest such a thing? Why, Missisopkins was a regular martingale where the young ladies were concerned, and watched over them like any Diana. She wouldn't have let one of them get their own living—no, not for anything!"

"But about Scotland, nurse? I know I shall hate it!" And Kate's face grew gloomy again.

"No, lovey, you won't. I expect your ladyship will enjoy it ever so when once you're packed and there. I've been in Edinburgh myself, and considered it a most beautiful city."

"I've never stayed there—I've only been through it. But I should like to stop for a few days and go to all the places which my adored Mary Queen of Scots visited. Think of standing on the very spot where they murdered Rizzio before her eyes. She never got over it, poor darling!" And Kate shuddered at the picture which her romantic imagination conjured up.

Tiffany shuddered in sympathy. "No more did poor Misannie when she saw the cat kill her favourite canary. I shall never forget how upset the poor young lady was. It was days before she got her appetite back properly."

"And I should like to go to Kirk o' Field, where Darnley was blown up," continued Kate, still dwelling in thought upon her beloved Mary Stuart. "I never like Darnley myself—he wasn't nice enough to her; but, all the same, it was dreadful for him to be blown to pieces in that way, just when he thought he was getting everything he wanted."

"It was, my lamb; quite the uptake. It reminds me of Mastrennery, who once put some pincushion caps in his pocket, and forgot all about them, and went to church with his mamma. And in the middle of the service one tumbled out, and he trod on it, and there was such a commotion all through the church as never was. The congregation thought it was anarchists; but Missisopkins knew better, and acted accordingly."

“You see, Tiffy dear, papa wants me to go and stay with my godmother because she’s so disgustingly rich and we’re so detestably poor; and if I made myself nice to her she might some day leave me a fortune.”

“And so she might, my lamb. His lordship is quite correct in his surmise, because, if you remember, there was money in your teacup when I told your ladyship’s fortune the other afternoon. ‘There’s a change coming,’ I said, ‘which will rebound to your ladyship’s advantage.’ And now it’s fulfilling itself and coming true. Why, there was Misemmie’s godmother, that she’d never set eyes on since she was a baby in long clothes, and yet sure enough when she died she left Misemmie a *Tate and Brady*, and also two dozen silver teaspoons, ‘all-marked, so that you couldn’t lose them in the wash. You note my words, my lady; there’s nothing like making friendly relations of your godfathers and godmothers.”

“Well, I only hope that I shall prove that the tea-leaves tell true, Tiffy dear, for I’m dreadfully in want of a fortune just now.”

“They’ll tell true, lovey; don’t you begin to doubt their words. I remember once I saw a stranger in Misannie’s teacup as large as life, and yet there seemed no prospect of any stranger coming just then. Yet sure as fate the very next day the man came to tune the nursery piano!”

Kate rose from the sofa and strolled to the door. “I believe you still like the Hopkinses better than you do me, nurse; and think them much nicer and prettier and cleverer than I am.”

Tiffany’s face assumed a judicial expression. “Well, my lady, I can make no pretence that there was one of them up to you in the matter of looks, because there was not, and it’s no use telling untruths about it, since their faces were plain for anyone to see. But kinder or better and more capable and sufficient young ladies never breathed; and handsome is as handsome does.”



## CHAPTER V

### THE ARRIVAL

**G**EORGE DESPARD made all due preparation for the reception of the Claverleys. He was not a little sore at the warning he had received: his feathers were considerably ruffled: yet it must be granted that he was not without some curiosity to see the fair damsel who was the cause of the outrage to his feelings. Six years ago Lady Kate was an extremely pretty girl; and a very mischievous girl, too, was Lady Kate in those days. She had played him many a prank which he had regarded with the indulgence of two-and-twenty for a madcap of fifteen. But six years makes a difference. He was told that Kate had fulfilled the promise of her girlhood, and had grown into a beautiful woman: he had heard rumours of her wilfulness, of her waywardness, of the hearts she had won without a thought—which she had recklessly thrown aside with a laugh. This method of procedure, however satisfactory it might be to my lady, would never do in his case. She should not find him an easy victim, a complaisant dangler, he promised himself—the sting of Mrs. MacBalloch's tongue still rankling. Yes, he was curious to see her: anxious, perhaps, to show her, as well as Mrs. MacBalloch, with what ease he could assume the impenetrable armour of a cool civility. Cherishing such feelings—yea, almost stroking himself with satisfaction at the possession thereof—he drove over to St. Columba's to meet the Claverleys on their arrival at that most ancient city.

It so happened that Lady Kate was the first to get out of

the railway carriage, and to her Despard approached with the intention of offering a greeting which he proposed to be positively arctic in its chilly dignity and politeness. Alas! his contemplated plan of campaign was at the outset disorganized by a rude but complete repulse. Lady Kate, with hardly a glance, and without waiting for him to speak, said coolly, "Oh! will you take my bag?" Then turning to her parents, who were descending to the platform with leisurely dignity, she said, "Very civil of Cousin Katharine: she has actually sent the groom-of-the-chambers to meet us."

"Very civil indeed, my dear," said the Earl, as he fumbled in his waistcoat for his eyeglasses; he was one of those men whose eyeglasses have a positive genius for secreting themselves. As a rule, indeed, an eyeglass in full working order is about as troublesome to find and as difficult to keep as a lively kitten.

"Will you be good enough to take up my bag?" repeated Lady Kate impatiently: "the sooner we are in the carriage the better."

By this time Despard had in a measure recovered from the shock to his dignity, though he still felt as if he had been overwhelmed by a moral avalanche. He took the bag which Kate still held out to him, and drawing himself up, said in stately accents almost worthy of the Earl himself, but entirely deficient in the latter's habitual suavity:

"I must apologize for my kinswoman's apparent want of courtesy. As she has no groom-of-the-chambers, she has sent her secretary, who, however unworthy of the honour, will nevertheless do his best—to see after your luggage."

By this time the Earl's struggles in search of his truant eyeglasses had been crowned with success. He carefully adjusted them, and glanced benignly at the tall figure in front of him.

"Why," he cried, starting with surprise, "it is Mr. Despard! How could you make such a mistake, my child?" He held out his hand to George, and went on, "My *dear* sir, you

must really pardon the very ridiculous error into which my daughter has most unwarrantably fallen. My love," turning to the Countess, "this is Mr. Despard, whom I am sure you remember."

The Countess did not remember him in the least, which is not surprising, as she had never seen him before. But, like a wise woman, she did not say so directly.

"I have often heard of Mr. Despard and of the great value Mrs. MacBalloch sets on the services he is so good as to render her."

Angry as he was, George could not but shake hands with the Earl and Countess, while Lady Kate looked on. She was rather horrified at the rudeness of which she had unintentionally been guilty: yet she was by no means filled with remorse, as a well-regulated maiden should have been, but rather with a mischievous delight at Despard's dismay. She felt, however, that she must do something in the direction of an *amende honorable*.

"I am awfully sorry, Mr. Despard," she said, with apparent penitence, though he saw clearly enough a naughty twinkle in her eye, "but it's years and years since I saw you, and then you had a lovely little moustache of which you seemed uncommonly proud; and now——"

"And now," answered George, gracefully accepting the situation while inwardly raging at the flippant impertinence of this proud young beauty, "you do me the compliment to think I am handsome enough and dignified enough to be a servant out of livery. When the happy time comes that my Lady Katharine Clare is engaging her establishment, I shall be able to offer myself for a high position therein, with the best of testimonials—her own." And the secretary bowed.

Lady Kate laughed; he was not taking it badly, she thought. Meanwhile Lady Claverley, who never could be persuaded to leave the cares of travelling to her servants, had discovered, after careful cross-examination of her maid and

my lord's man, that every article had been extracted from the luggage-van; and the Earl had discovered that it was confoundedly draughty, and wondered why they could not take their seats in the carriage instead of exchanging compliments on the platform. Lord Claverley's suggestion, like all great ideas, was simplicity itself; and was immediately adopted with no dissentient voice.

The three ladies and the two maids got into the omnibus, followed by Lord Claverley; while Despard—with his lordship's servant—superintended the transfer of the luggage from the platform to the Ladyhall cart. When this operation was concluded, George came to the carriage to assure the Earl that all was well with his goods and chattels.

"Thank you, thank you," said Lord Claverley, with his accustomed courtesy; "I am indeed grateful to you, Mr. Despard, for so ably and efficiently arranging our arrival. And now shall we start for Ladyhall?" he added, making room for George.

"Pray don't move," replied the latter stiffly; "I am going to ride outside."

"Oh, I'm sure you'd better not," said Lady Claverley anxiously; "it is so cold, even in summer, on the top of an omnibus, and you are quite hot with looking after all that tiresome luggage. There is nothing so likely to give people chills as getting into open carriages while they are warm with exercise; it is a thing I never allow Lord Claverley to do in any circumstances."

"Thank you, Lady Claverley; but I am not susceptible to cold, I am glad to say."

"But you needn't be susceptible; anybody can catch cold from getting into an open carriage while they are hot—even the strongest person," argued the Countess, with bad grammar and good sense. She was so sorry for the summary treatment which George had just received at her daughter's hands, that she addressed him in the somewhat high-pitched and slow-

toned voice which one usually uses in conversing with sick persons and young children. It was, on her part, an entirely unconscious display of sympathy with him.

But Despard was not to be appeased. "I am accustomed to driving in open conveyances in all conditions of the weather or of myself."

"Pray come in, pray come in," cried Lord Claverley; "there is plenty of room, my dear sir, plenty of room."

"I should prefer not to incommode you," persisted George, raising his hat and moving away; "if you will allow me, I will ride outside with the rest of the menservants."

"Well, then, be sure to take a dose of ammoniated quinine the very minute you get indoors," Lady Claverley called after him; "if you don't, you're bound to catch the most fearful cold."

And so they started.

"Really, Kate," said the Earl testily, "you have made a most unfortunate mistake with regard to that young man; most unfortunate! I can see that he is deeply wounded and mortified—as, indeed, I should have been in his place. I can't imagine what you were thinking about to do such a thing!"

Kate laughed. "I was thinking about godmother Mac-Balloch's groom-of-the-chambers, who ' apparently has no existence outside of my own thoughts."

"It was a most unpardonable error: most unpardonable and most unladylike!"

At this moment one of the horses gave a loud snort.

"There," cried Lady Claverley, "there he is sneezing already, poor young man! I knew he'd catch cold if he rode outside."

Kate laughed again. "It wasn't Mr. Despard: it was one of the horses."

Her mother took no notice of her remark. "I shall insist on his taking a dose of ammoniated quinine the very minute

we get in." Then, turning to her maid, "Baker, is there a bottle of ammoniated quinine in my dressing-bag?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Then see that Mr. Despard has a dose the very minute we get in—before even the luggage is taken upstairs."

"Yes, my lady."

"One teaspoonful in a wineglass of water: you understand?"

"Quite so, my lady."

"And see that he drinks it every drop—doesn't leave anything at the bottom of the glass."

"Yes, my lady."

"He isn't likely to 'leave a kiss within the cup,' judging from his present behaviour," remarked Sapphira, who had watched the little drama with silent and scornful amusement. She was so used to being placed in a false position herself, and to finding the situation intolerable, that she was not without a certain unholy joy at the sight of poor George's discomfiture.

"And quite proper that he shouldn't," exclaimed her aunt; "for I know no more dangerous habit than kissing people who've got colds in their heads. It is a thing I highly disapprove of, as those running colds are always infectious. I make it a rule myself never to kiss anybody who has sneezed to my knowledge within the last twenty-four hours; as, of course, even if it isn't an ordinary cold, it may be measles. Young people can't be too careful about kissing, as they are even more susceptible than older ones."

All this time Lord Claverley had been looking at the receding view through the omnibus windows. "My dear, you are all so busy chattering, that you are missing the sight of this venerable and picturesque city, so full of interesting and historical associations. Let me beg of you, Henrietta, to turn your attention for a moment from what I may term the philosophy of the medicine-glass to subjects more worthy of your notice. Behold the ruined towers of one of the most ancient cathedrals in Scotland."

"Yes, love, very pretty."

"And the remains of the castle where so much of mediæval history was made."

"Yes, love. One tablespoonful in a wineglass of water: you're sure you understand, Baker?"

"Quite sure, my lady."

"Kate, my child," Lord Claverley went on, "it is always well for the young to add visible illustrations to their stores of accumulating knowledge; therefore I wish you to note carefully the various landmarks of this quaint and historical town. There is the spire of the University church."

"I see, papa."

"And the University itself."

"I see." Here Kate turned to the faithful Tiffany. "Oh, look, Tiffany, that is the University of St. Columba's. I know you are always nuts on colleges and things like that."

Mrs. Tiffany bridled. "I confess, my lady, that cemeteries of learning have always been of interest to me ever since my dear Mastrennery went to college and caught cold from tumbling out of his boat into the river."

"And a very proper feeling, Tiffany; very proper indeed!" said the Earl, who always made a point of being gracious to his dependants—when he was not unduly irritated against them. "And may I ask, did the worthy son of your late employer graduate at Oxford or at Cambridge?"

"At Cambridge, your lordship; and a damper, wetter place I never did see."

"And he had a serious boating accident, you say? Dear me! How very unfortunate!"

"Yes, your lordship. He tumbled into a river called the Camphor, or some such name—though if it was Camphor by name it wasn't by nature, for he caught as bad a cold as he ever had in his life. And that's saying a good deal, for they were no light matters weren't Mastrennery's colds. None of your little sniffing, sneezing affairs for Mastrennery; but a

regular heavy cold on the chest, with complications and a steam-kettle." And here Tiffany fairly inflated herself with pride in Master Henry's manifold afflictions, as if she had been a herald proclaiming his style.

"Dear me, dear me, very sad—very sad indeed! And to what college was this unfortunate youth attached?"

"To Lock's College, my lord."

Lord Claverley looked puzzled. "Lock's, Lock's? I do not seem to remember the name, Tiffany."

"Begging your lordship's pardon, that's where Mastrennery was. I recall the name quite well, because I said to myself at the time that I wished to goodness he'd turn the lock once for all on such a damp, unhealthy spot, and never go near it again."

Kate began to laugh. "Wasn't it Caius College, Tiffy?"

"Well, my lady, perhaps it was. I shouldn't be surprised. But after all, what's the difference between locks and keys?—they mean the same thing. And now your ladyship mentions it, I do believe that was the name; and that I said to myself I wished to goodness he'd turn the key once and for all on such a damp, unhealthy spot, and never go near the place again."

Here a motor-car dashed past the omnibus with a loud hiss, causing both horses to shy.

"Oh, dear!" cried Lady Claverley again; "there's that poor young man sneezing again. I knew he'd catch cold if he persisted in going outside."

"That wasn't a sneeze, aunt, it was a motor," explained Sapphira.

"And a most disgraceful motor too," added her uncle; "it is iniquitous—positively iniquitous—to go at such a rate! I cannot imagine how the local authorities can permit this illegal speed. It is dangerous both to life and property."

"Poor gee-gees!" said Kate, "they were frightened out of their wits."



“And almost out of their harness,” added Sapphira; “a far more parlous state!”

“I think you might almost make it a teaspoonful and a half, Baker.” It was the Countess who spoke.

“Yes, my lady.”

To use a slightly mixed metaphor, motor-cars were among Lord Claverley's hardest-ridden hobby-horses; so now he pranced off at full speed. “They ought to be put down by Act of Parliament—by Act of Parliament, my love.” He always appealed to his wife in moments of strong feeling; it was one of the greatest compliments he paid her—a compliment all too rare in these days, when “to go your own way and to let your wife go hers” is the most approved method of easy journeying. The husbands and wives of a bygone day never dreamed of taking these separate paths, but travelled through life hand-in-hand; and these wayfaring men and women—though perhaps fools in some other respects—did not err therein.

“I cannot imagine what the world is coming to,” Lord Claverley continued, “with all these horrible new-fangled inventions; nothing is any longer our own, not even the high-road.”

“No, love, it is quite shocking. I think we'll say a teaspoonful and a half.”

“It is, Henrietta; it is a disgraceful state of things. The British aristocracy is an effete power—an extinct volcano—our day is over. The British public appropriates everything—even, as I said before, the high-roads.”

“Unless it gave him a singing in the ears.” This cryptic speech emanated from the Countess.

“Eh, eh, Henrietta? What did you say, my love? I didn't quite catch your point.”

“I was only wondering if a teaspoonful and a half would be too strong a dose for that poor young man. What do you think, Baker?”

"Perhaps it would, my lady."

"Do you think so too, Tiffany?"

"Well, your ladyship, it is very dangerous to take too much of anything—especially strong drugs. I shall never forget how bad poor Mastrerbert was once after a champagne supper, because his mamma made him take a dose of effervescing magnesia the minute he came in, and he said she'd given him too strong a dose. He was quite sick and giddy and couldn't walk straight, and his poor head ached something awful all the next day. Missisopkins was quite in a way, as she'd never known anybody took in that way after effervescing magnesia before; but she supposed it was because she had given him half a teaspoonful more than usual. And, as she said herself, my lady, you can't be too careful in ministering those strong drugs to give the exact amount subscribed."

"I can't think why you bother about that tiresome man, mother," said Kate; "he is the most odious person I ever met."

"But I am so afraid he has caught a cold in his head."

"All the better if he has! For there's certainly nothing else in it; and nature abhors a vacuum," replied Kate the pert.

Meanwhile Despard was engaged in the discovery that the open-air treatment was not proving effective in soothing his outraged dignity. As a matter of fact he was not sorry for this—on the contrary, he was rather disposed to hug his griefs and to cherish his wounded pride.

If at the station he had proved equal to the occasion and had behaved himself with becoming restraint, he had by no means forgiven Lady Kate for her mistake, if mistake it was. He was not altogether sure that the error was unintentional; it fitted in very well with the mischievous pranks of the spoiled child of six years ago, and with all he had heard of her doings in later years. He might have done her more justice had he not been smarting under the rude kindness of the warning

he had received as to the difference in their relative positions. As a result, while the carriage rapidly covered the ground between St. Columba's and Ladyhall, he was engaged in brooding morosely over the scene at the station and in making up his mind that Lady Kate, if a very beautiful girl, was an impertinent minx ; that her life had been too pleasant, and her triumphs too easily won. It would be well for her to learn that her charms were not irresistible ; that men were not always to be trifled with. It was a branch of her education which, he concluded, had been sadly neglected ; it was a branch which he proposed to take as his province. If he had his way, my Lady Kate should learn a thing or two. Yes, all things considered, Katharine Clare had not made a favourable impression on Mrs. MacBalloch's secretary. Of this fact no one was more conscious than Katharine Clare herself. At the station she had made one or two attempts at a reconciliation. But Despard's *amour propre* was sorely hurt, and he most resolutely declined all overtures for peace. At this Lady Kate began to take offence. If the man was a bear—why, he was a bear—and should be treated accordingly. If he chose to be huffy, she need have no scruples, and any penitence for her mistake was out of place. Nay, rather was it not her duty to drive the lesson home? Apparently he was a stuck-up young man who didn't know his place. In that case it behoved her to teach it him. Wherefore both these young people decided to embark on an educational enterprise which promised to be of some interest ; and so far as Lady Katharine was concerned, she proposed to combine instruction to her pupil with amusement to herself.

## CHAPTER VI

### ELECTRICITY IN THE AIR

THERE was electricity in the air at Ladyhall—that sort of electricity which makes everybody ready to quarrel with anybody about anything or nothing, as the case may be. And electricity bored Lady Claverley to the verge of extinction.

She hated—with the implacable hatred of the easy-going and good-humoured—anything in the shape of friction. To her, peace was the chief end of existence, and ways of pleasantness the only paths worth pursuing. In her mind, good breeding and good temper were synonymous terms, and the climax of mortal sin what she called “flying into a passion.” She herself never argued—never quarrelled—and therefore she had no sympathy nor patience with people who argued or quarrelled with her or with each other. The main object of her calm and well-ordered existence was, as she herself would put it, “to make everything pleasant for everybody,” and if in this laudable endeavour she now and then put a shade too much gloss upon ugly facts and unpopular opinions—well, there is no conditional trust, as far as we know, imposed upon the vast legacy bequeathed to the peacemakers. She liked all things to be cheerful and comfortable, and it was never her fault when they were not, but her most dire misfortune. Perhaps now and again the dear soul was slightly too prone to sacrifice the interests of truth to those of peace, a failing which—though incompatible with saintship—is by no means unendurable in married life. And, after all, more are called to matrimony than to martyrdom, “for which relief much thanks.”

The Claverley party had only been a week at Ladyhall, and there were already signs of storm in the atmosphere; but, as Lady Claverley said pathetically to herself, "What could you expect from three bad tempers and two men?"

They were assembled in the central hall one wet morning, rain without and storms within; and as it was the third wet day in succession, there was some excuse perhaps for Lord Claverley now and then to drop into heated argument, and his daughter into sacred music.

"What a pity that it rains!" exclaimed Lady Claverley; "it is nearly always wet whenever I come to Scotland."

"Scotland's no worse than England, when you come to that," retorted her hostess. "I've never seen it rain in my life as I've seen it rain at Claverley."

Human nature never can bear the reproach of a damp climate. It is rare to meet with a man who does not confide in you sooner or later that his particular abode has the lowest rainfall in the British Isles.

Therefore the Earl spoke up. "Pardon me, Katharine, you are mistaken. The rainfall in Salopshire never exceeds, during the wettest season, twenty inches."

Here the Countess rushed in, on peace intent. "Still, Claverley, you must admit they are very full inches; it is dreadfully wet at Claverley sometimes. I wear out my umbrellas at a shocking rate."

"But, my dear Henrietta, I am giving you statistics no one can dispute. The rainfall at Claverley is——"

"Oh! never mind statistics, love; I never trouble about them. And, besides, what are statistics compared with umbrellas?—I mean in a case of rain. I assure you a new umbrella only lasts me about three months; it all goes into little holes round the top—and by the top, of course, I mean the bottom."

"That, Henrietta, is because you persistently use your umbrella as a walking-stick, and wear it out against your dress; which proves my point. It is a closed umbrella that gets worn in the carrying—not an open one."

"Of course it is, Claverley; that explains why mine wear out so fast, and why they so often get bent or something in the umbrella-stand so that I can't open them when it does begin to rain."

A man with a statistic is like a woman with a baby. The moment he sees it he cannot resist stroking it and petting it and dandling it up and down.

"Therefore, my lady, you perceive that your dear husband is right after all, and that the rainfall at Claverley is exceptionally low." The Earl was so pleased at being right that he grew absolutely playful.

"Of course you are, Claverley; and Katharine is right too; because if I didn't think it was going to rain, I shouldn't take an umbrella at all—not even one that won't open."

"I repeat, the midlands are the wettest part of the British Isles," said Mrs. MacBalloch. She never compromised after the fashion of her cousin-in-law. Possibly if she had, the late Sandy MacBalloch's life would have been longer, yet would not have seemed so long.

The Earl looked drearily out of the window and began to quote poetry—a sure sign of depressing weather.

"O Caledonia stern and wild,  
Wet nurse for a poetic child!"

His wife gave a little scream. "My dear Claverley, that's not at all nice talk!"

"I was quoting, my love, merely quoting."

"Then I wish you wouldn't quote. I can't bear quotations. They nearly always end in something which would have been better left unsaid."

"Excuse me, Claverley, you were misquoting—as you generally are." Mrs. MacBalloch was not going to mince matters—especially on such a dull morning as this. "The poet said 'meet'—not 'wet.'"

"The poet had no right to refer to such a subject at all," said Lady Claverley, with some sternness, "in any terms what-

soever. But that is the worst of poets ; they never seem to know where to stop, or what not to say before young people."

"The poet was all right : it is Claverley that was in the wrong," persisted Mrs. MacBalloch.

The Earl felt nettled. He always prided himself upon an exhaustive knowledge of the poets. "But Caledonia *is* wet : very wet indeed. You must see that for yourself, Katharine."

"The poet did not think so—or he'd have said so."

"I think the poet quite forgot himself," said Lady Claverley severely, always ready to blame the absent if she could thereby conciliate present company.

"No, Henrietta ; as I said before, the poet didn't forget himself—it was your husband who forgot the poet."

"But it *is* wet—extremely wet," persisted Lord Claverley, beginning to lose his temper. "Scotland is acknowledged to be the most rainy portion of the kingdom."

"With the exception of the midlands. I've never seen such rain in my life as I've seen at Claverley."

Again her ladyship felt constrained to rush in between the combatants. "Places vary so much at different times ; it just depends on what part of the year you are there, and what year it is. For my part, I don't mind what the weather is like if only there are plenty of nice people—just as at dinner it really doesn't matter what the food is like as long as the guests are agreeable. I remember the nicest party I ever went to was a little scratch affair at the Sandlands'—no *entrées*, but all so cheerful."

These contests bored Lady Claverley horribly ; she could always keep her own temper with perfect ease, but when it came to keeping her husband's as well it was a different matter. "Don't argue, my love," she continued ; "I can't bear arguments."

"Neither can I," added Mrs. MacBalloch ; "even when I am convinced by an argument I never own that I am."

"And I often own that I am even when I'm not," said the

Countess, "in order to stop it." She then rose from her chair, and proceeded to collect her knitting-apparatus. The secret of successful warfare lies in diplomatic retreat; so she prepared to retreat diplomatically as soon as she possibly could.

Meanwhile the younger generation were quarrelling with equal bitterness on the other side of the hall—or rather, as Mrs. MacBalloch more correctly termed it, the house-place; and they had no peacemaker in their midst.

"I can't imagine why people ever come to Scotland," grumbled Lady Kate; "I'd as soon go to the bottom of the sea."

"It is quite as simple a journey, Lady Katharine," replied Despard; "the only difference is in the difficulty of the return."

Kate looked annoyed. This young man invariably tried to appear quite at ease in her august society; and this, so she flattered herself, he could not be.

"Some people think themselves very clever," she remarked airily.

"That is so; and it is a delusion not without its pleasures."

"I wish I could share it," Sapphira said.

"But you couldn't," replied George, with a charming smile; "because in your case, Miss Lestrangle, it would not be a delusion."

One of George's many unpardonable sins in Kate's eyes was that he apparently preferred Sapphira to herself; and this, she felt, cast not only a slur upon her, but also upon his own judgment and taste. No wonder she was well-nigh breaking out into oratorio whenever she was more than five minutes in his unappreciative society!

But Sapphira beamed. She also was quite conscious of the fact that George talked to her far more than he did to her cousin; but she was not yet old enough to have discovered that a man's eye rather than his tongue points out the way which his heart will probably take. When a man talks to one woman and looks at another, the former need not trouble



herself to scintillate: for she may rest assured that her most brilliant remarks are irretrievably foredoomed to oblivion.

"I really can't see the good of being clever and witty and educated and nonsense of that kind," said Kate, with a shrug of her shapely shoulders; "for my part I don't see where the fun of the thing comes in, do you, Mr. Despard?" She was determined to make him talk to her, whether he liked it or not.

"It is impossible rightly to estimate a sensation until one has experienced it, Lady Katharine."

Kate looked at him sharply. Was he making fun of her or was he not? The doubt irritated her—and not unnaturally; but his handsome face showed nothing but the most polite indifference. Sacred opera was not far from her lips just then.

Sapphira glowed with satisfaction. Evidently George thought her far cleverer than Kate; which she undoubtedly was. "I am sure Mr. Despard agrees with me," she said, "that the possession of any gift ensures pleasure to its owner; which pleasure is quadrupled by the absence of this gift among the assets of his friends and neighbours."

George laughed. "I am afraid you are right; it is not in what we ourselves possess, but in what others lack, that life's true pleasure lies. The real joy of a red cord is not that we are lucky enough to be inside, but that others are raging furiously together outside; and if the others happen to be our friends and acquaintances, so much the better. I am afraid human nature is pretty bad, Miss Lestrangle, taking it all round."

"But to know that one is bad is the next best thing to being good, isn't it?" asked Sapphira.

"That is a common and consolatory notion, but I don't see that to diagnose a disease is quite the same thing as to cure it."

"But the one leads to the other."

"That doesn't at all follow, Miss Lestrangle; in fact, it's usually just the opposite where moral rather than physical ills are in question. As a rule, when people say, I know I am proud—or hot-tempered—or jealous—or any other similar thing,

you are sure that they have no intention of trying to cure that failing, but on the contrary are making quite a pet of it."

Kate began humming selections from *The Golden Legend* under her breath. She was out of this conversation, and she did not like being out of things. But the other two went on enjoying themselves undismayed.

"Isn't it funny," said Sapphira, "that people are so pleased to have some faults and so ashamed to have others?"

"Decidedly funny. People are positively proud of being proud, and seem to regard a hot temper as desirable a convenience as a hot plate at breakfast; but who ever heard of anyone's saying, I am so deceitful, or so selfish, or so stingy? Yet I don't know that one set of faults is any worse than the other."

"I suppose they are more unbecoming."

"Or rather that it is the fashion to think that they are more unbecoming—by no means the same thing."

"Then you think that becomingness is a matter of fashion?"

"Certainly, Miss Lestrange; because what we think becoming at one time we think unbecoming at another, and each generation has absolutely different views on the subject."

Kate could bear it no longer. She felt that somebody must notice her or she should die. To some women attention and admiration are as necessary as air—they absolutely cannot live without them. "What dull, uninteresting talk!" she exclaimed. "I never heard such tiresome, long-winded rubbish in all my life! If you want to talk why can't you find something worth talking about, instead of harping on all those stupid old faults and failings and things?"

The smile died out of George's eyes, and all the expression with it. The face that he turned to the impertinent young lady who thus challenged him was devoid of everything save the coolest civility. "A thousand pardons, Lady Katharine, for inflicting my foolish remarks upon you for so long. Perhaps you will kindly choose a subject which shall be more worthy of your attention."

"Then if you were a woman would you rather be clever or good-looking?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"Have you never thought?"

"Certainly not. I don't trouble myself about contingencies which are not in the least likely to arise."

Sapphira sat silent, an unamiable smile upon her lips. It was delightful to hear the redoubtable Kate taken down in this way. She longed to cheer the champion.

Kate made another attack. "But which do you like best yourself, Mr. Despard—clever women or pretty women?"

"Can't say, I'm sure. You see, I'm not a good hand at generalizing."

"But you must have an opinion?"

"No; I should say it depends entirely upon the individual case."

The beauty pouted. "I don't believe you know whether a woman is pretty or not."

"I know whether I think her pretty or not, and that is good enough for me."

"What sort of woman do you think pretty?" The impulse to flirt was rarely resistible to Kate. She loved the sport for its own sake, irrespective of the quarry.

"They are not measured by 'sorts.'"

"I mean what is your style? Do tell me! It would be so interesting to know, wouldn't it, Sapphira?"

But Sapphira knew better than to put her oar in. She was one of the few women who have learned the occasional possibility—and power—of silence.

"But why should my misplaced and feeble admiration be more interesting than my 'stupid old faults and failings,' Lady Katharine?"

"Because I say that it is."

"Pardon me for correcting you: but in this case I know a good deal more about the matter than you do, and I can positively assure you that it isn't."

Kate's eye twinkled with mischief. "Let me be the judge."

"I fear that is impossible. The verdict is already given."

"But I adore to hear what sort of people other people admire. It always interests me immensely."

"I regret, then, your inevitable disappointment in this case."

"You mean you don't think I should like to hear what sort of things you admire in a woman?"

"I mean I am quite sure I shouldn't like to tell you."

"Because it would hurt my vanity?"

"I did not say so."

Kate laughed. "Never mind; the risk is mine, and I'll take it."

"Precisely. And the secret is mine, and I'll keep it."

"Anyhow, you needn't look so melancholy over it, Monsieur Despair."

"You should never be guided by appearances, Lady Katharine: I am certainly not feeling melancholy."

"I see: only bored."

"I wouldn't contradict a lady for worlds."

"Well," continued Kate, unabashed, "it is a pity that you don't admire the sort of young lady that I am."

"Pardon me: I should rather say that it is a pity you are not the sort of young lady that I admire, Lady Katharine."

"Perhaps it is a good thing from your point of view that I'm not."

"I was considering the matter entirely from yours."

"Young people," cried Mrs. MacBalloch in her most strident tones, "we are all going to drive into St. Columba's. Go and get your things on."

Which they straightway did: proving again the truth of the statement that the secret of successful warfare is diplomatic retreat.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE POWER OF SUGGESTION

IT was after the Claverley party had been staying at Lady-hall for a little over a fortnight that the Countess approached her lord in the following humble and wifely fashion.

"It is a most remarkable thing, Claverley, but whenever I follow my own judgment in preference to yours, I always seem to make a mistake."

The Earl purred complacently. "Is that so, my love? Is that so indeed?"

Naturally the phenomenon was not so remarkable in his eyes as it was in her ladyship's.

"Yes, Claverley; and it is, as you say, a remarkably funny thing." She really thought he had said so. It is a strange trick of memory that we nearly always think that what we actually said to another person that other person said to us; and it sometimes becomes dangerous as well as strange, when we take to repeating the remarks.

"Well, Henrietta, may I inquire what modern instance has suddenly impressed upon your mind the wisdom of this most wise saw?"

"It's about Kate. It was a mistake for us to come up here with her, as you said it would be. You have such sound judgment in things of this kind."

"Yes, yes: I do remember saying something to that effect." He remembered nothing of the kind, having never uttered such a remark; but again memory played one of her tricks. And in this instance it is to be feared that Lady Claverley was

not quite so ingenuous as she was in the former one, but took wicked advantage of memory's little joke.

"Yes, Claverley; if you remember, you said that Kate had better come here by herself; but I was obstinate, and persisted that we should all come with her; and so we did. And now, too late, I see how wise you were, and how much better it would have been had I followed your advice."

Lord Claverley remembered it all perfectly (although it had never happened), as his wife intended that he should.

"With your usual good sense," she went on, "you said that Kate would never get on with Katharine MacBalloch as long as we were here to hamper her; and also that Katharine would be far more likely to grow fond of Kate if we weren't on the ground. And it has all come to pass exactly as you said. You must see for yourself how right you were."

The inspired prophet sighed with that mitigated sorrow which Jonah would have felt had Nineveh indeed been overthrown. "Yes, Henrietta, I cannot help seeing as you say, that my unfortunate prediction has come only too late." Until his wife suggested it, he had not a notion that anything but the most rapturous peace reigned between his daughter and her godmother: nevertheless he believed every word that he said. Such is the power of suggestion.

"Well, Claverley, of course, having realized my own mistake in not being implicitly guided by you, the next thing is to retrace my steps as far as I can, and to walk in yours."

"Certainly, my love, certainly."

"And, as you say, our best course is to go away from here as soon as possible, and to leave Kate and Sapphira at Lady-hall."

"Yes, yes, yes, that does appear to be the wiser—I might almost say the only—course now open to us."

"I quite agree with you. What a wonderful knowledge of human nature you have! I can't think where you picked it all up."

Lord Claverley purred louder than ever. "I have lived a long time, Henrietta, and have kept my eyes open—kept my eyes open, my love, and allowed nothing, not even the smallest trifle, to escape my notice. That is how I have gained such a clear insight into men and their motives. It is no special gift, I take it; merely the experience of years." And the Earl shook his head with the gravity befitting the wisdom accumulated during decades of leisured ease; while the Countess put on an expression of conjugal reverence and admiration which was an artistic triumph.

"Well, it's very wonderful, wherever it comes from. I wish I had it. But, as I haven't, the best thing I can do is to be guided by yours."

"Quite so, my love; quite so."

"And therefore I shall lose no time in getting you and myself away from here. But the question is, where shall we go?"

"Precisely, Henrietta, that is the question—the only question to be considered at present. Where shall we go?"

"I agree with you that it must be somewhere in Scotland; so that when Kate's visit here is ended she and Sapphira may travel south with us. It would never do, as you say, for two young girls to travel all that way by themselves. You have such proper views as to what is correct for young people."

"Well, I maintain that it is the duty of older people—notably of parents—to see that the young are safely shielded and guarded; and especially in these days when the daughters of the bourgeoisie fly all over the country unchaperoned and undefended. Yes, Henrietta, I am strict on that point, I confess; I would never allow my daughter to go about alone, as do the daughters of the middle classes."

"And quite right, too. But now the question is, what is to become of us? As you have pointed out, two things are clear: it must be somewhere in Scotland; and it must be somewhere where we can stay for an indefinite time, as it would never do to shorten Kate's visit to her godmother."

"That is so, Henrietta ; that is so."

"What do you say to going to the Greenhaughs'? They have taken a place in Scotland this year, and begged us to visit them."

The Earl started as if he had been shot. "My dear Henrietta, how could you think of such a thing? I despise and detest Sir Gregory Greenhaugh more than I can express. He is a Radical of the most advanced and dangerous type ; and nothing would induce me so far to countenance his principles as to visit at his house. Really, my love, I am surprised at you ! I should have thought you knew by now how much I dislike Greenhaugh."

She did—perfectly.

"Well, then, there are the Tattleburys ; they've invited us scores of times."

"My dear Henrietta, people who make starch or soapsuds or something of that kind. No, love, I draw the line at tradespeople ; I know what I owe to my order."

So did she, dear naughty lady ! And—what was worse—used that knowledge to her own advantage.

"Then there's nobody left but old Lady Crosskeys. We shall have to go and stay with her."

"I would sooner go and shut myself up in a nunnery. I wonder at your suggesting such a thing, Henrietta, I do indeed. Why, the woman is no better than a Roman Catholic, with her prayers and her daily services and her Saints'-days ! No, my dear, I know what I owe to my early training ; I have never yet kept a Saint's-day, and I never will ; and, what is more, I will never stay in houses where such Popish customs prevail. Never !"

"And you are quite right, Claverley. Poor dear mamma never approved of Saints'-days ; she thought them idolatrous ; and daily services, too. She used to say that if you heard two good sermons on a Sunday, it would take you all the week to act up to what you'd learnt in them ; so that you'd



have no time for such things as Saints'-days and daily services, and the like."

"Your mother was a wonderful woman—a wonderful woman, my love. In questions of Church government I invariably and entirely agreed with her."

That was quite true. It was on questions concerning domestic government that the late Lady Dunbar and her son-in-law did not always see eye to eye.

"But the question remains," said Lady Claverley, "where are we to go? There doesn't seem anywhere, and yet we must go somewhere."

"Certainly, my love, certainly. We must go somewhere, as you say."

Then the Countess made the move for which she had so carefully—and so capably—paved the way. "I know that you will suggest going to Elnagar to stay with Dunbar for a bit. But Augusta is such a nuisance—she talks so much. I almost think Lady Crosskeys would be better than Augusta!"

"No no, Henrietta; you are letting your feelings run away with you. Garrulity may be bad, but Romanism is worse."

"Do you really think so?"

"Much worse, my love, much worse; and much more far-reaching in its influence."

"Of course, there's that," replied Lady Claverley, with the air of one requiring much persuasion and convincing; "when you stay with people who bore you, you are bored, and that's the beginning and end of it; but when you stay with people who are revolutionary or common or ritualistic or terrible things of that kind, you seem to be supporting and encouraging them somehow in their dreadful ways. I hadn't thought of that till you suggested it, Claverley; but you have such a happy knack of taking a thing all round and seeing it from every side."

"That, again, is no special gift," replied Lord Claverley modestly; "it is but the result of the experience of life and of a knowledge of the world."

“Then you think we’d better go to the Dunbars’?” said her ladyship, apparently still doubtful. “It isn’t what you care about, I know; but, as you say, it seems the only thing just now.”

“That is so, my love; I have nothing else to suggest. As you have proved—and rightly so—all my suggestions beside this one are hardly feasible.”

“That’s the nuisance of it. I wish we could have found something more in your line; but, at any rate, Elnagar is better than all those other places.”

“Far better, Henrietta; incomparably better.”

“And, after all, we mustn’t think of ourselves and our pleasure; we must rather consider Kate and her interests.”

“Of course we must, my love, by all means.”

“That is like you, Claverley, always thinking of other people and never of yourself! And that reminds me: I have had a letter this morning from Augusta Dunbar, asking if we will go on there for a visit after we leave here.”

“What a coincidence, Henrietta! What a remarkable coincidence—for an invitation to come for us to go to Elnagar, just when I had decided that to Elnagar we ought to go! It seems almost supernatural. But the law of coincidence is oftentimes very strange.”

It is; but not always quite so strange as it appears.

Thus it was decided—as, indeed, Lady Claverley, dear soul! had always intended it should be—that Lady Kate’s parents should go on to stay with Lady Kate’s uncle and aunt; while that young lady herself, with Sapphira and Tiffany in attendance, should remain at Ladyhall in order to besiege—to the best of her ability—the respective hearts of Mrs. MacBalloch and George Despard.

Now it happened that fate—or whatever mischievous imp was acting as fate’s understudy for the time being—decreed that the more Kate Clare fell out of love with George, the more Sapphira Lestrangle fell in; so that by the time Kate

had arrived at distinctly fierce hatred of that young man, Sapphira had travelled equally far in the direction of warm affection. Nobody has much patience (and by nobody is meant no woman) with those women who give their love to the other sex unasked ; and the feeling is a sound and healthy one on the whole, though perchance a little hard at times ; but Sapphira had the excuse that—in a chivalrous anxiety to save her as much as possible from the countless little hurts and pricks dependent upon being a dependant—Despard was a great deal nicer to her than he had any knowledge or intention of being ; and it was only after she had been in Scotland for a fortnight, and in love for ten days, that she made the disquieting discovery that love and kindness are by no means always synonymous. True, a clever young woman such as Miss Lestrange ought to have lighted upon this fact at least a week earlier than she did ; but—like all women who are unaccustomed to men's attentions—she greatly exaggerated the lasting weight and importance of these transient if gratifying tributes ; and—after the manner of her kind—foolishly imagined that a man loved her simply because he was civil : just as the more attractive half of womankind are prone foolishly to think that a man does not love them simply because he is rude.

But when she did at last arrive at the conclusion that George's kindness was not the expression of admiration, but distinctly the reverse, she lost no time in vowing vengeance against the innocent cause of her shame : for she was far too clever a young woman to see anything exactly as it was, and she exaggerated the secretary's contempt for her quite as egregiously as she had ever exaggerated his liking. As was natural, being but a woman, she felt constrained to punish someone else because she herself had made a mistake, the severity of the other person's retribution being, of course, regulated by the enormity of her own error ; and she found an accomplice ready to hand in her cousin Katharine, who was

quite as angry with George for being cruel as Sapphira was with him for being kind.

“Did you ever know such a hateful creature in your life?” remarked Lady Kate to her cousin one day apropos of the handsome secretary.

“He is certainly not agreeable,” said Sapphira; “or, at least, he does not think that you and I are worth being agreeable to.”

Kate was still further ruffled by Sapphira’s saying “you and I.” Which of us has not experienced a similar irritation when friends, whom we regard as obviously our seniors, say “people of *our* age”—or when fools, whom for the nonce we are suffering gladly, remark, “Such things are quite out of *our* line”?

“Not agreeable?” cried Kate; “what a mild way of putting it! I should say he was simply the most horrid, detestable, hideous, stupid, aggravating, tiresome creature that ever was invented. I never hated anybody in my life as I hate him.”

“I shouldn’t so much mind his being stupid if he only didn’t think me stupid too,” said Sapphira.

“And I shouldn’t so much mind his being hideous if he’d only take the trouble to look and see whether I am hideous or not.”

“He has vile manners,” continued Sapphira; which was distinctly unfair, as he had been most polite to her as long as she would allow him. After all, to refrain from falling in love with a particular woman was not necessarily a breach of etiquette; though the particular woman will maintain to her dying day that it is.

“He has no manners at all,” quoth Kate.

“I don’t wonder at his being rude to me: I’m a nobody,” said Sapphira, with doubtful taste, which she herself would have described as false pride. She never properly grasped the fact that good manners are subjective, not objective; she

imagined that if a man was polite to her it was because she was a lady—not because he was a gentleman. It is by no means an uncommon mistake.

“I should like to punish the man for his horridness to me, if only I knew how,” cried Lady Kate, lashing herself to still further wrath by memories of George’s indifference to her charms.

“I could tell you how.”

“Oh! do, do. It would be lovely to make him suffer for having been so disagreeable. And, besides, I really feel I owe it to my sex that such insolent indifference as Mr. Despard’s should not go unpunished.”

To be indifferent to indifference is a purely masculine art; no woman worthy of the name has ever yet attained to it.

“But the bother is,” Kate went on, “that it is so difficult to invent punishments for people who don’t care for you: I mean punishments that hurt. And punishments that don’t hurt are no better than umbrellas that won’t open, or cash-boxes that won’t shut. Mother’s umbrellas and cash-boxes are always taken that way; and they really aren’t much use in the long run, either as shelters or savings-banks.”

“The best way to cure indifference is to turn it into something else.”

“Of course it is, most wise Sapphira; the best way to cure indifference is to cure it. I could have told you that myself. Ask another.”

“Don’t be stupid, Kate. You know what I mean.”

“It wasn’t I who was stupid this time; it was you. I never heard you say anything more obvious; and I thought that clever people like you always prided themselves upon never saying the obvious thing.”

“I may say it; but you don’t seem to see it.”

“That’s because I’m not clever. I never see anything except what’s under my nose. And my nose is such a nice small little darling, that you can’t expect it to overshadow a

very extensive view. Now if I'd got a great aquiline, Gothic thing, like Mr. Despard's, I should see what I should see; and that's more than he does, the wretch, for he never sees anything at all. Bah! I hate the very mention of him."

It is strange that when women hate the very mention of a man they usually mention him with some frequency.

"I know what I should do if I were you," said Sapphira, wishing with all her heart that she were indeed Kate.

"And what's that? Fire away. I'd do anything in my power, or out of it, to convince the creature that he isn't fit to black my sweet little patent-leather boots."

"I don't fancy he covets the office," replied Sapphira drily. Kate's frank vanity and open self-appreciation always irritated her to the verge of madness.

"Well, I wouldn't let him undertake it even if he wanted to," continued the unconscious offender, "unless he could do it better than the men here. I never saw such boot-blackening in my life; it almost reduces Tiffany to a state of coma when my boots come up from the lower depths, looking more like charcoal biscuits than anything else. She positively teems with suggestions as to what 'Missisopkins' would have said in such agonizing circumstances. But you are wandering from the point, Sapphira. How am I to punish that odious young man?"

"By making him fall in love with you and then laughing at him."

Kate fairly gasped at the audacity of the suggestion. "Oh, Sapphira, what an idea!"

"It's a very good idea," said the inventor proudly.

"Yes; it isn't bad, I must admit: but it would give me a great deal of trouble, and I hate trouble and effort and perseverance, and worthy things like that."

"Oh! of course, if you don't resent Mr. Despard's obvious indifference to your beauty——"

"But I do resent it, Sapphira—I resent it most frightfully.

And I think it so ignorant of him not to understand what a very charming young woman I am ; but to treat me exactly the same as he would if I was at least forty, with a squint at that. I feel just like artists feel when people see no difference between the Academy and the National Gallery. I regard him with sorrow as well as anger."

"Then think how triumphant you'd be if at last he laid his obdurate heart at your feet."

"It would be great fun ; I can't deny that. Though I expect even then the creature's heart would be too hard to walk upon till there'd been a steam-roller over it as well."

"Then you could kick it out of your way."

"Oh ! Sapphira, that would be worse than football, and football is worse than war. No ; I shouldn't touch the thing at all ; I should just politely say, 'Excuse me, sir, but I think you've dropped something, which—though worthless to anyone else—may still be of some use to you.' And then I should pass on with one of my sweetest smiles, and take no further notice of the affair."

"Well," asked Sapphira, after a short pause, "are you going to adopt my little suggestion ? It would be worth some trouble to bring that young man to his marrow-bones after the way in which he has treated you."

"Yes," replied Kate slowly ; "I think I shall. It would be worth some real hard work to succeed in humbling the insolent idiot at last. Yes ; I shall take the trouble—though he isn't worth it. But *I* am."

Thus did these two scorned damsels decide to humble in the dust the proud head of Mrs. MacBalloch's secretary.

But they had reckoned without their host—or, rather, their fellow-guest.

## CHAPTER VIII

### KATHARINE AND PETRUCHIO

“IT is no go,” sighed Lady Kate, “no go at all! All my efforts are useless; I can make nothing of him. He’s more like a log of wood than a man.”

Sapphira smiled pleasantly. The failures of our superiors are never without their compensations. “You don’t go about it in the right way,” she said.

“Yes I do: I go about it every way—the right, and the wrong, and the indifferent. But I can’t induce the creature to take the slightest notice of me—much less to fall in love. I don’t know what he is made of.”

“The usual materials, I suppose.”

“But he isn’t made of the usual materials, Sapphira—that’s just it. The usual materials always dance to my piping, and leave me to call the tune, but this man dances to his own tune, and it isn’t one that I ever heard of. Oh dear, oh dear! what shall I do? I never was so insulted in all my life!”

“You don’t manage him properly,” repeated Sapphira.

“Because he won’t be managed—that’s the rub! I am gay and impertinent, and sweet, and pensive, and gentle, and imperious by turns; and yet he doesn’t seem to see the slightest difference between Kate the angel and Kate the shrew. What can you do with such a man? Why, I don’t think he’d see the difference between Cleopatra herself and a nursery-governess! He is thoroughly bad and cruel and hard and deceitful and selfish and horrid; that’s what’s the matter with him!”



“But you still want to punish him, Kate, don't you?”

“Of course I do—more than ever. First, I want to punish him for his rudeness to me; and, secondly, I want to punish him for not letting himself be punished before—like boys at school who have to write more lines because they haven't written any lines at all, don't you know?”

It was about a week after Lord and Lady Claverley's departure; and their beloved daughter was having anything but a good time. In the first place she and her godmother did not get on very well together. Mrs. MacBalloch was one of the numerous army of married women who think that there is no place in the scheme of creation for the old maid; therefore she urged it on Kate in and out of season that the duty of that young woman, as of all young women, was to marry, and to marry soon—a doctrine which Lady Katharine disputed to the death; and, in the second place, Mr. Despard was more than ever resolute in his imperviousness towards her ladyship's charms and advances—which, likewise, tried her patience not a little.

“Well, I've got an idea,” said Sapphira, who hated George quite as much as her cousin did, though how much that was it is not within the power of any chronicler to say.

“Out with it, then; you are always rather good at getting ideas, I admit. Now, I never got one in my life—an original one, I mean; I only get them second-hand from other people at a reduced price, and the consequence is, they are generally a size too large for me.”

Sapphira looked very serious. “My idea is that we should get up some amateur theatricals, and make Mr. Despard act the part of your lover. Ten to one, when he is obliged to do it in play, he'll begin to do it in earnest.”

Kate jumped up from her seat and flung her arms round Sapphira's neck. “Oh, you darling, you perfect darling, what an absolutely priceless idea! Of course, he'll fall in love with me after he has made love to me—like throwing puppies into

the water to teach them to swim. You always learn to do things by having to do them; and besides—even if he doesn't—we shall still have the fun of the theatricals; and I'm simply dying for a little fun and pleasure, for this place is as dull as a convent or a convict prison."

Kate was so delighted with her cousin's suggestion that she straightway flew to consult Mrs. MacBalloch as to the feasibility of the scheme; and that lady—who was always willing for young people to enjoy themselves as long as they did so in her way and not in their own—by a fortunate chance, was as much taken with the idea as her goddaughter had been, and fell in with the plan at once. In her younger days she had been very fond of theatricals, and very clever at them; so she was only too ready to revive an old pleasure, and to renew an almost forgotten interest.

The only sign of storm arose when it came to settling the play to be performed. Kate naturally wanted a modern piece; but Mrs. MacBalloch put down her small but weighty foot, and decreed that it should be Shakespeare or nothing. This would probably have led to a serious quarrel—and to the frustration of the plan—if Sapphira had not, contrary to her usual custom, devoted herself to the manufacture of peace. She was wise enough to see that it would be a Shakespeare play or no play at all, and she recognized the fact—even persuaded Kate to recognize it also—that half a loaf (this was how those two young women of the Philistines described to each other the works of the great master) was better than no bread.

After much (and this time amicable) discussion, *The Taming of the Shrew* was the play fixed upon. It was decided that Kate should take the part of Katharine, George that of Petruchio, and Sapphira that of Bianca; while the minor parts were to be played by various young people in the neighbourhood. Invitations were sent out to all the countryside, and it was to be a very grand affair altogether, ending

in a ball, followed by a supper. In short, Mrs. MacBalloch decided to do the thing handsomely.

Then followed a delightful three weeks of designing dresses and learning parts and having rehearsals: a time when people were knit together by united effort and common interest—when the air was full of quotations and ripe with jokes, and the jokes were of that most delectable sort which are only comprehensible to the initiated, and which are caviare of caviare to all not *au fait* with a particular piece and all the references therein.

It is a noteworthy fact that almost any speech is funny if only people make it often enough. Remarks such as, "It is really of no consequence," or, "Why, certainly," have not in their essence any special wit; yet when constant repetition has turned them into catchwords, they become positively side-splitting in their effect, and the oftener they are repeated the funnier they are. None of us can explain why this is; yet we are all aware of it—and especially those of us who have ever taken part in amateur theatricals. And this is why the preparation of a play is so delightful to all concerned. We all want to be witty and amusing, and generally find the attainment beyond us; but what is easier than to repeat at intervals, "What, never?—well, hardly ever," or, "Just my sort"—and what, to those who are in the know, can be more screamingly funny?

As for George, he was still mounted at the very top of his highest horse; but he was young, though so untender, and had by no means outgrown his youthful delight in heart-easing mirth and all the other good things mentioned in *L'Allegro*, so that the laughter and jollity arising from the preparation of the play was as enjoyable to him as it was to Kate herself. Now and again, it must be admitted, he was sorely tempted to dismount from his steed, and dance along hand in hand with the bewitching Katharine, forgetting for the nonce that they two ought to hate—or at least ought not to love—each

other, forgetting, in fact, everything, save the freemasonry of youth and health and high spirits; but then he would remember himself and his dignity and all the paraphernalia of his wounded prestige, and would sit more firmly than ever on his stately mount, communing with his own soul how he owed it to himself to keep that most irritating young woman at a distance. Poor George! He was not yet old enough or wise enough to have learnt that what we owe to ourselves is a debt the payment whereof gives little satisfaction—and the receipt even less.

And as the days went on and rehearsal succeeded to rehearsal, George discovered that there were two Georges in the field, and one of the Georges had to confess to the other the melancholy fact that he was playing the traitor. In short, he could not act with Kate without being influenced by her charm. He was not in love, but he was beginning to recognize the fact that the young lady, whom his outraged feelings condemned him to detest, was not without a certain fatal fascination. He caught himself on several occasions gazing at her with undisguised admiration; there were times when, to his astonishment, he forgot to hug his wrongs and to cherish his natural resentment, when he was actually guilty of amicable feelings towards his "beauteous enemy," to quote Don Whiskerandos. Of course, on such occasions, the other George took the traitor roundly to task, recalled the slighting words, the careless negligences, and vowed that never, never would he pardon such wilful insults. But the fact remains that a kindlier feeling not infrequently possessed his heart, only to be expelled when a remembrance of his wrongs renewed his old resentment.

Mrs. MacBalloch was in fine form. She enjoyed the bustle and excitement of preparation, and she also considered that the contemplated entertainment would further the object that she had at heart, namely, the marriage of her goddaughter. She had already seen enough at the rehearsals to show her

that Kate would act well and would look even better; therefore what more likely than that one of the numerous eldest sons on the list of the invited should take that opportunity of falling in love with Lady Katharine Clare?

With some lack of tact—wilful people being very rarely tactful—Mrs. MacBalloch mentioned to Kate her wishes upon this point, and Kate, unfortunately, did not take the suggestion in good part, she also being of an unadaptable pattern. Dark beauties, such as Lady Kate and her godmother, are not usually smooth-tongued; they are made of sterner stuff.

“I can’t think why you are so keen on my getting married, Cousin Katharine,” she expostulated; “I hate men.”

“That don’t signify. One will be enough for the purpose, and you could make an exception in his case. As for the rest, the more you hate them the better he’ll be pleased.”

“Then nothing will induce me to hate them.”

“Very well. In that case the less you hate them the better they’ll be pleased. It’s all one to me.”

“But I don’t want to get married, and, what’s more, I won’t.”

“Then you’ll be a fool.” It had never been Mrs. MacBalloch’s custom to mince matters, either during her late husband’s lifetime or since, and matters which are not minced are sometimes a little tough in the swallowing.

“I can’t for the life of me see,” Kate went on, “why people should always be in pairs, like stockings or grouse or candlesticks. Why can’t a woman be unique and stand alone, as if she were an umbrella or a drinking-fountain or a table-centre? Some things are made singly—like nosebags; and some in pairs—like spectacles. I happen to be one of the nosebag, table-centre species, and have no need of another to match me.”

“No, you aren’t; no woman is. And when she does stand alone she is only an odd one belonging to a pair, the other having been mislaid.”

“I know; like a drawing-room vase that is banished to a spare-room, because it can't remain in the drawing-room after its fellow is broken.”

“Exactly; and it is dull for a vase in the spare-room. The drawing-room is its proper place.”

“You don't know me, Cousin Katharine, and how unique I am, and how capable of standing as a centre ornament all by myself on the drawing-room mantelpiece.”

“Perhaps not,” replied Mrs. MacBalloch drily, “but I know my world, and I know that there is no place there for a single woman without money. A rich woman can please herself, I admit; she will always have a position of her own, though even then she wants someone to look after her property for her; and a husband is on the whole less trouble and more credit than a land-agent. For my part I approve of husbands, and think no establishment complete without one. But for you, you simply cannot afford the luxury of remaining single, my dear Kate.”

Kate flushed with anger. “Yes, I can—and will.”

“No, you can't—neither could I when I was your age. Hence your late second-cousin-in-law.”

“But I repeat, I can and will.”

“And I repeat, you can't and shan't.”

“Money isn't everything,” argued Kate, with a toss of her head; “I have rank.”

“Pshaw! An exploded fetish.”

“Beauty, then.”

“Pooh! A stock-in-trade that won't keep.”

“A pretty wit of my own.”

“Worse and worse. A distinct disadvantage.”

“And no brains worth calling such.”

“The only lasting good you have mentioned. There is plenty of room in the world for fools.”

“Then I'll take my share of it,” quoth Kate.

“And no one deserves it better, for you appear to me, my dear, to be a fool of the finest water.”

Kate did not reply this time, but hummed a few bars of the *Sicilian Vespers*.

"And you will have a title of your own," her godmother went on, "which makes the matter much worse. A single woman is bad enough, but a single Countess is positively indecent."

Kate walked to the door, her head in the air. "Nothing will induce me to marry, so I tell you so once for all. I hate men, and I'm not going to have one always dangling from my *châtelaine* to please anybody."

"Tut, tut, my dear, you are endowed with the capacity of making any man supremely miserable. It is a pity that so much talent should be wasted."

Kate's only reply was a violent bang of the door, as she shut it behind her.

She went straight to her room, still boiling with rage, when she found the faithful Tiffany, into whose sympathetic ear she poured—as she had been wont to pour all the troubles of her childhood—the present enormities of Mrs. MacBalloch.

"That cruel woman has been telling me that I ought to go and marry some disagreeable, selfish brute of a man; and I won't, I won't, I won't!"

"And I wouldn't, lovey, if I didn't want to," replied Tiffany, very much in the same tone she would have used had her young lady declined to take a dose of medicine or to learn a spelling lesson.

Kate flung herself down upon a sofa. "I hate men, and I've always hated them, and I always shall hate them. And where's the sense of marrying things that you hate?"

"None at all, my lady, none at all: I wouldn't go and marry a man for anything if I were you—not if I felt like that."

"I shan't. I shall never marry at all as long as I live."

"Oh! I wouldn't say that, lovey," cried Tiffany in tones of remonstrance, as if there were plenty of things besides men that Lady Kate could marry if she preferred.

"Yes, I shall and I shan't. I mean I *shall* say it, and I *shan't* marry."

"Well, your ladyship must just think it over and not be fussed about it, and do nothing in a hurry," said the handmaiden soothingly, "and be sure and wait for Mr. Right, and see when he comes that he's a nice personable gentleman."

Kate groaned. "I believe at the bottom of your heart you approve of marriage, Tiffy."

"Well, my lady, I do and I don't, as the saying is. If parties must marry, let them choose them as are companionable, and not be carried away by mere good looks and nonsense of that kind. I've no patience with those folks who marry to taste and repent at pleasure."

"I should repent immediately whoever I married. If he was an angel from heaven, I know I should soon get to hate him, I should be so tired of him."

"Not if he was Mr. Right, lovey; that makes all the difference. I remember Miscarry always said that nothing would ever induce her to marry a man who sang, because she had had so much music at home and was sick of it; yet when Mr. Right came (which, by the way, his name was Carpenter), he was at it from morning till night, and Miscarry accompanied him. Oh! you should just have heard him sing *With virtue clad* out of Haydn's *Cremation*; it was something beautiful!"

"That was all very well for Carry, but *I* couldn't marry a man simply because he sang and played the piano and did other parlour tricks."

"Of course not, my lady. But I daresay he'd do something else quite as nice."

"No, he wouldn't; he'd do everything that was horrid, and I should hate him."

"Never mind, my lady, never mind. Just wait patiently, and something nice'll turn up, don't you fear. But your ladyship mustn't be in a hurry."



"I'm not," replied Kate. Which was quite true.

"You see, my lady, a husband lasts a long time, so it ought to take a long time to select one. It's a great mistake to choose things in a hurry that wear for a long time. I shall never forget how Misemmie once bought a sponge in a hurry, and then when it came home she couldn't abear it, it was so much bigger when it was in the water than it had looked in the shop. And yet she had to make it do, because a sponge is too expensive a thing to throw away, and Missisopkins wouldn't have heard of such extravagance either, and it lasted for months and months, that sponge did, and wouldn't wear out."

Kate laughed. "Foolish Emmie!"

"She was that, my lady. And I said to her, 'Misemmie, let this be a lesson to you never to take a short time in choosing what you will take a long time in using.' And from that time to this she never did."

## CHAPTER IX

### THE TAMING OF THE SHREW

THE evening, to which Kate had been looking forward with so much eager excitement, at length arrived. All was ready. The house was filled with guests, including Lord and Lady Claverley, who had returned from Elnagar for the occasion. The last rehearsal had been held; the stage manager had hurled his final objurgations at the players' devoted heads; the scene painters were putting the finishing touches to the scenery; the dressmakers were busy with the alterations which every woman will recognize as being absolutely necessary in the ladies' costumes.

Despard, busily engaged in seeing after the final preparations for the reception of the guests, was a prey to mingled feelings. He felt tolerably secure with regard to his own part in the play. It is true he had a wholesome dread of stage-fright—even as the distinguished admiral, who, when asked how he felt when going into action, replied, "I was horribly afraid of being afraid." But as he had gone through the ordeal of the dress rehearsal with complete success, he philosophically said to himself that he supposed that it would be all right in the end, and if he did break down, why he did, and there was an end on't. But he had another dread and a more potent: and this was how he was to play his part with Lady Kate, and yet keep his head. At the thought of her bewitching face, her haughtiness, her struggle for mastery, her complete submission, the hot blood went coursing through his veins, his heart beat wildly, and he wondered whether he

could restrain himself from clasping her in his arms and swearing that the prettiest Kate in Christendom must be his.

"It's but for one night, thank Heaven!" he muttered to himself. "I must get through this evening. Confound the girl! Why should she have set her heart upon getting up this play, and turning my head with her charming and provoking ways? And yet how pretty she is! Of course, if I were to let her know how much I admire her, she would—teach me my place"—and he smiled grimly. "No, my Lady Kate," he went on, "you shan't have that satisfaction. It's only one more day: to-morrow you will find me—in my right mind."

Nevertheless George was to outward appearance calm enough; and issued his orders and superintended every detail with complete *sang-froid*, until he was able to assure Mrs. MacBalloch that everything had been done that could be done, and that all was ready for the arrival of the guests. That excellent lady, however, was by no means to be satisfied by her secretary's assurance, though she might have learnt by now that when George Despard said a thing was so, it was so. Truth to tell, she was apparently in a state of nervous excitement; and even as Mr. Peter Magnus, on the eve of his proposal to the maiden lady of mature years, insisted on having the portmanteau, the bag, and the brown-paper parcel extracted from the boot of the Ipswich coach, in order that he might have ocular demonstration of their having been placed in that secure receptacle, so Mrs. MacBalloch insisted on personally inspecting such arrangements as could be seen, and cross-examining George on the orders issued to his numerous subordinates. He bore it with unexampled patience; and, having gone through the whole matter three several times, escaped to his own room, to snatch a hasty meal before donning his costume for the play.

As for Kate, she likewise was being dressed for her part, with her faithful henchwoman in attendance.

"I wish to goodness you'd chosen a prettier piece, my lady," grumbled the latter, "and with proper fashionable dresses instead of these outlandish garments that Missisopkins wouldn't have worn even as dressing-gowns—at least, not when she went out visiting. She was always very particular about her best dressing-gowns was Missisopkins; and quite right too: for to my mind there's nothing makes a spare-room look so recherchy as a nice pale blue or pink flannel dressing-gown hanging up behind the door."

"I'm sorry you don't like our play, Tiffy," replied Kate meekly; "but, you see, it is Shakespeare who is responsible for it, not we."

"But you are encouraging him by acting in it, my lady; and I never did care for Shakespeare myself—never. He isn't my style, and it's no use pretending that he is. He writes such a lot of rubbish about nothing that nobody can understand, and wouldn't want to if they could. Look what a rigmarole that poor Lord Wolseley is always talking in *Henry the Eighth*; and as for that old Falsetooth in *Henry the Something-else*—why, I think he is positively low at times. I wonder how any gentleman could have demeaned himself by writing about such a person." And Tiffany pursed up her lips in disgust.

"You are very well up in Shakespeare apparently, in spite of your disapproval, Tiffy."

"I used sometimes to take the young gentlemen to see his plays in the holidays, because Missisopkins wished it; but it was always against my judgment, and I told her so. I didn't see what good it did them to hear of the goings on of such people as Othello and Desde—somebody—or—other, or What's-his-name and Cleopatra. So different from the example set them by their dear papa and mamma!"

Kate politely stifled a laugh.

"For my part," Tiffany continued, "I can't think why you didn't choose a really nice play, such as *The Area Belle* or *Box*

*and Cox.* Those are the sort of pieces that I like, and that it can't do nobody any harm to see."

"Well, but, Tiffy, it couldn't do anybody any harm to see *The Taming of the Shrew.*"

Again Tiffany pursed up her lips. "I'm none so sure of that, my lady. What an example it sets to husbands. And suggests all sorts of troublesomeness to them, too, which they would never have thought of left to themselves."

"Yes; I'll admit that Petruchio doesn't set a very good example to husbands."

"By no manner of means. Your ladyship should just have seen the curate that Misemmie married; he'd never have contradicted his wife, or thrown the supper about, or done any of them outlandish tricks. Why, on a Sunday night, when there was nothing but cold beef for supper, and that as tough as leather, you'd never hear a murmur from him. Now he *was* a gentleman, and no mistake; very different from that young man in the play."

"Nevertheless, it would be more fun to be married to Petruchio than to a curate, I should think."

"Law, my lammie, folks don't marry for fun!" expostulated Tiffany, as she heated the curling-tongs. And then both mistress and maid became absorbed in the intricacies of an Early Italian toilet.

An hour later the splendid ballroom was filled with a brilliant throng; the black coats of the men contrasted with the gay dresses of the ladies; and here and there the tartan of a Highlander (or of a Southron, who on the strength of a shooting desired above all things to be considered a Scotsman) added a touch of picturesqueness to the scene. As Mrs. MacBalloch surveyed her assembled guests, she noted with inward satisfaction the presence of two or three most eligible eldest sons; and shook her head over a good-looking detrimental making himself exceedingly agreeable to a handsome girl, the sparkle of whose jewels was only exceeded by that of

her eyes, bright with the excitement of present naughtiness and of coming pleasure. Mrs. MacBalloch determined that she would take very good care that Captain Spencer should have little opportunity of trying the effect of his black moustache, his V.C., and his empty pocket on the irresponsible Lady Kate. No, Kate should make a brilliant match; on this point her domineering godmother was determined. And when Mrs. MacBalloch had made up her mind, it required an earthquake or a motor-car to move her. It was without a shadow of a doubt as to the result of her plans that she settled herself in her comfortable armchair in the centre of the front row, and prepared to enjoy the play. And very much did she enjoy it; nor were her guests behindhand in their delight and in their applause. It was a complete success; as arranged for this performance, while including everything essential to the plot, it was short enough to be entertaining without causing fatigue. It was played brilliantly and crisply by all; but the bright, particular stars of the evening were Lady Kate and George Despard.

Never had the future Countess of Claverley appeared so charming; whether as Kate the curst, quarrelling with her sister, or exchanging swift thrusts of barbed wit with Petruchio, or after her marriage mazed by her husband's violence, or finally as the submissive wife—all through she did not seem to be acting at all; she was Katharine to the life. And Despard was not to be outdone by her. Throwing aside the impassivity wherewith he had protected himself ever since the mistake at the station, he fairly let himself go. He revelled in the task—unreal as it was—of bringing the haughty beauty to subjection. As with Kate, so with George—only to a far greater degree—it was not acting at all; for the time being he *was* Petruchio.

The curtain fell amid general applause and loud calls for the actors. Last of all, George led Lady Kate before the curtain, and as he did so he could hardly hear the cheers for

the tumultuous beating of his heart. Kate curtseyed again and again to the audience; and when, with the prettiest grace imaginable, she turned and made a reverence to George, it was as much as he could do to refrain from taking her in his arms and kissing her before them all. Yet, though he contrived to control himself, though none knew what it cost him to beat down that strong heart of his, he knew what it all meant. Lady Kate had triumphed: all his resolution, all his pride, all his outraged vanity went by the board. He loved her: he loved her more than life itself. Love was stronger than pride. Love was stronger than revenge. Love was stronger than hate; for he acknowledged that he had hated her. Love was the crown of life. He felt a thrill of exultation as he confessed to himself his love, hopeless as he well knew it to be. What was life without love? Nay rather, could he be said to have lived at all, until that blest moment—that bitter moment? There did not seem to him any strangeness in the two feelings. Come what come might, love had entered into his life with its exquisite bliss, its excruciating torture.

And Lady Kate, what were her feelings? The spectators only saw a bewitchingly pretty, wilful girl bowing before a tall man who wore a conventional smile on his handsome face. But Lady Kate, with feminine intuition, could see behind that conventional smile. She did not know all that was in Despard's heart, but she saw enough in his eyes to know that she had conquered. He loved her: yes, he loved her: and a thrill of triumph shot through her. His heart was hers, all hers, she saw, to do what she liked with. The disposition of that heart troubled her but little; a trifle like that might be postponed till to-morrow. Kate was living in the present. She had won the game, and the defeat of the enemy should be turned into a rout. The play was over, was it? To Kate the play was only at its beginning. There was the ball, there was the supper; and Lady Kate intended to make the most

of her opportunity. Never again was she likely to have such another. Her foe was captured; before the evening was over he should acknowledge himself her slave.

It had been arranged that the dance should be held in the great hall, while the temporary theatre was cleared and prepared for the supper. The actors having agreed beforehand to wear their stage attire for the rest of the evening, there was no delay. As he was conducting Kate to the ballroom, Despard, in a somewhat hesitating voice, begged for a dance.

"Nay, sir," said Kate, her eyes sparkling saucily, "it is not for you to beg; you forget—the shrew is tamed."

"Well?"

"So for this night it is for you to command. What is your will, sir, that you send for me?" And Kate made the prettiest little curtsey in the world.

Despard fell into the humour of the situation. "Why not?" he thought to himself. "I may as well have one night's happiness. To-morrow——" and he shrugged his shoulders.

"If you will have it so, Mistress Kate, my commands are these: you will dance the first dance with me. Then you will entertain our guests. But when the time comes I shall take you in to supper myself."

"That will be lovely," cried Kate, with delight. Then meekly dropping her eyes she repeated, "It is for you to command, and for me to obey."

They had now reached the ballroom, and were quickly surrounded by friends eager to offer their congratulations. Among them were the Earl and Countess.

"My child," quoth the Earl in touching accents, "you have fulfilled—nay, more than fulfilled—your father's fondest hopes. Those charming lines of the great bard on due wifely submission were never more nobly recited. And you, sir," turning to Despard with a courtly bow, "have worthily maintained the authority of a husband. Indeed, sir, your acting was—if a



humble criticism may be permitted to a man of age and experience—your acting, I say, was perhaps a little too realistic. In the supper scene there was vividly brought to my imagination Charles upsetting the coal-scuttle—a habit, I regret to say, common to all footmen—or letting fall the vegetable-dishes. Do you not agree with me, my love?” turning to his wife.

“Yes, Claverley, of course you are right; it was just like Charles, only more so if possible,” agreed the Countess. “But I cannot say, Kate, that I at all approve of such a waste of good food. I am sure Brown could never keep the weekly books down if your father were to throw the meat about in the way your husband did in the play.”

At this word George glanced at Kate, who blushed and laughed gaily, though she clearly saw the passion in his look. At this moment Mrs. MacBalloch came up.

“Katharine, you acted capitally. And you, George, weren’t at all bad. But the play is over, and we have no time for empty compliments. Get your partners, young people, as soon as you can. Katharine, let me introduce you to the Master of Killeven.” Then in a slightly lower tone: “He is to take you in to supper presently. George, go at once and tell the band to strike up.”

Despard flushed hotly, and it must be admitted that Mrs. MacBalloch spoke as if she were giving an order to a recalcitrant page-boy.

“I beg your pardon, Cousin Katharine,” said Lady Kate, “but I cannot have my husband ordered about in this way. Besides, Petruchio is engaged to me for the first dance.”

“Engaged to you? Don’t be absurd, Katharine. I never heard such nonsense. George, go at once.”

“You will stay where you are, Mr. Despard,” cried Lady Kate imperiously. Then she suddenly became meek and submissive. “I crave your pardon, my lord Petruchio; but ’twas your order that I should dance with you, and it is for me to give you such duty as the subject owes the prince.”

Mrs. MacBalloch began to tap the floor with her foot. Her temper was fast rising, but she remembered in time her duties as hostess. She saw that Kate was in one of her maddest humours, and that any attempt to coerce her would only produce a violent scene; and it would never do to risk a scene before eligible eldest sons. So with a strong effort she crushed her rising passion; and with an inward resolve to give my lady Kate the full benefit of her opinions on the morrow, she smoothed her brow and gracefully succumbed.

“Very well, my dear,” she said; “have it as you choose. We will all be at Petruchio’s orders to-night.” She turned to Despard and went on: “Perhaps, sir, it will please your lordship for the dance to proceed.”

George gravely bowed, and in a few minutes the floor was covered by a crowd of dancers. Meanwhile Mrs. MacBalloch was giving Lord and Lady Claverley the benefit of her opinion of modern young ladies in general and of their only daughter in particular.

“I cannot agree with you, I regret to say,” said the Earl in his most dignified accents. “It seems to me only natural that young people should enjoy themselves. Kate is no doubt excited by the play; but, in my humble opinion, it is a most pleasing idea to carry on the comedy during the dance, and an appropriate and delicate compliment to Mr. Despard, who has played admirably to-night, and is, I am sure, a most excellent and worthy young man.”

“Very excellent, very worthy,” replied Mrs. MacBalloch drily; “but I am not so sure that you will be pleased to have him proposing to become your son-in-law.”

The Earl was evidently nettled, and preparing to carry on the argument with some heat. But his wife, intent as usual on the blessings of peace, forestalled him.

“I am sure, Katharine,” she interposed in her most soothing accents, “that Mr. Despard has much too well regulated a

mind to make such a mistake as to his position, or to misinterpret Kate's behaviour to-night. But I *quite* agree with you that she has been indiscreet. It was very wise of you not to try and check her to-night; but to-morrow I will give her a little talking to."

"And so will I," quoth Mrs. MacBalloch grimly; and no one who saw her could imagine that she intended to err on the side of leniency in the proposed expostulation with her wilful young kinswoman.

Meanwhile the delinquent was enjoying herself immensely. Her high spirits were contagious, and Mrs. MacBalloch had at least the satisfaction of knowing that the evening was an immense success. With the exception of Sapphira, who looked on at the realization of her scheme with an envious vexation, the only person there not entirely happy was George himself. True, to outward appearance he was the picture of cheerfulness. Handsome, clever, successful so far as the acting was concerned, he received compliments and congratulations on all sides, and he met his triumph with modesty, yet with satisfaction. He was not one of those who pretend to care little for popularity. As a result he was pronounced on all sides as agreeable and pleasant as he was good-looking. Yet in his heart of hearts he was profoundly dissatisfied. He could not but feel how hollow was his success, how transient his triumph. Nevertheless, for this one night he would bask in Kate's smiles, even if to-morrow he was made the butt of her scorn. Careless of future misery or future insults, he would enjoy the present while it lasted. It was, then, with an elate air and a bright smile that he approached Kate to lead her in to supper. All through the meal Lady Kate was in the gayest mood. She showed a pretty deference to whatever George said. She was determined to lure him on until his love should overmaster his self-restraint. The surest way seemed to be to carry on the jest that they were still Katharine and Petruchio. But although she saw how deeply George was in her toils, and

although he carried on the game with spirit and with skill, he still kept a firm grip of himself.

When supper was over, Lady Kate rose from the seat which she occupied next to Despard's at the head of the table, the place of honour having been allotted to these two chief performers in the evening's entertainment. And a handsome couple they looked in their fancy dresses, the panelled walls serving as an admirable background to their quaint costumes; so handsome, in fact, that every eye was upon them, and every ear attentive to their pretty fooling.

"Husband, let's follow to see the end of this ado," quoted Kate from her recent part, preparing to lead the way back to the ballroom, and eliciting a fresh burst of applause from the rest of the company.

The temptation to continue the quotation was too strong for George; for the life of him he could not resist it. "First kiss me, wife, and we will," he replied in a voice thick with emotion.

The demon of coquetry lurked in Kate's eyes. "What, in the midst of the street?" she asked in mock consternation.

Her Petruchio was equal to the occasion. "What, art thou ashamed of me?" he demanded in equally effective tones.

Then the very devil of mischief entered into Lady Kate. With a touch of consummate art she suddenly transformed her coquetry into tenderness, her remonstrance into submission. With drooping eyelids and a pretty little gesture of surrender she turned toward Petruchio, softly murmuring the words of her Paduan namesake, "Nay, I will give thee a kiss; now, pray thee, love, stay."

It was too much for George. Her words, her gesture went to his head like wine. With a wild laugh he suddenly caught her to him, and kissed her passionately on the lips before them all.

There was a moment's silent amazement at the strange turn

that things had taken ; and then a fresh burst of applause at the savage realism of Despard's acting. This was even better than he had been upon the stage. As for Kate, she freed herself, furiously blushing, and with indignation flashing from her eyes.

"How dare you!" she cried ; and rushed from the room.

George reeled like a drunken man ; and then, sinking into his chair, dropped his head on his hands, muttering hoarsely, "What have I done? What have I done? I must have been mad!"

The Countess had followed Kate from the room, but the Earl, though much shocked, did not lose his accustomed urbanity. "The play is over," he said ; "your act, my dear sir, was perhaps not unnatural—though carried a little too far—yes, a little too far."

"I beg your pardon," began George.

"Not a word more, my dear sir, not a word more," said the Earl, waving his hand as one who closed an unpleasant incident.

"The young minx has met her match," muttered Mrs. MacBalloch to herself. "I'll have a word with Master George to-morrow morning—but all the same, I'm glad he punished her, the little vixen!"

## CHAPTER X

### THE LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

**B**UT a speedy change was destined to come o'er the spirit of the dream.

Next morning there was weeping and wailing and wringing of hands at Ladyhall ; for the excitement of the preceding evening had proved too much for Mrs. MacBalloch, and she had quietly passed away in her sleep. She had faced death as she had faced life—alone and with a good courage ; and when the maid came to call her as usual in the morning, she found her mistress lying dead with a smile upon her handsome face. At least the slim, tired body lay still and smiled : the indomitable spirit had gone forward into the next phase of continuous existence, where it could learn—unhampered by the many infirmities of the flesh—those lessons which it had failed to master during its sojourn upon earth.

True, Katharine MacBalloch had not been altogether idle during her time of probation in this world : she had learnt to meet life's troubles with courage, its trials with wisdom—to manage her affairs with discretion, and to give willingly of her abundance, regarding her fortune as a trust rather than as a freehold possession ; she had behaved herself with justice towards her equals and with generosity towards her dependants : she had never allowed beauty or sickness or wealth—three of the sorest temptations to selfishness that ever beset the sons and daughters of men—to render her indifferent to the claims of those about her, or careless of their interests. But she had still much to learn. And it is not in lessons of courage and

discretion and generosity and justice, valuable though they be—but in learning to take the yoke upon them and to be meek and lowly in heart—that men and women at last find rest unto their souls.

Experience had taught Katharine MacBalloch much : but for the great final lessons, without the learning of which she could never be made perfect, she required another Teacher.

As was natural, there was regret as well as interest felt for Mrs. MacBalloch's death throughout all the country round Ladyhall. She had not been altogether popular ; her tongue was too sharp for that : but she was a woman of strong personality ; and it is people with strong personality that leave blanks behind them when they go away.

It is a strange gift, this thing that we call personality. It is quite different from—though not opposed to—charm ; and is equally indefinable : nor is it the same thing as intellect or ability. But it is the attribute which gives to some the knack of filling a room when they come into it, and of emptying it when they go out ; of writing their names so indelibly upon everything they touch, that such things for ever after bear their sign-manual : and of so impressing their individuality upon all those with whom they are brought into contact that they can never be—even to the most slight acquaintance—quite as if they had never been. This subtle and far-reaching influence may be for good, and it may be for evil : but the world is slow to learn that evil is not more infectious than good. If we can catch a disease from certain persons, we can also catch health from others : if some companions exhaust and depress, others equally exalt and vivify. Therefore to be healthy-minded and healthy-bodied is a duty we owe to our neighbours quite as much as to ourselves : it is what we *are*, even more than what we *do*, that really helps or hinders those around us. Are we strong, vigorous, hopeful, joyous?—then we are disseminating strength and vigour, hope and joy wherever we go : but if on the contrary we are depressed and timid, anxious and morbid,

then are we infecting the moral atmosphere with insidious germs of fear and misery, doubt and despair.

Mrs. MacBalloch, having her full share of this gift, was missed in all the countryside for miles round St. Columba's. People talked of her incessantly for the next few days, smoothing over her faults and exaggerating her virtues as they would never have done while she still lived. And then they turned from the contemplation of her character, and discussed with even more zest the possible disposition of her property.

On this point no one experienced more anxiety than did Lord Claverley: and no one awaited with more curiosity than that nobleman the reading of his cousin's Will. Had Mrs. MacBalloch left anything to Kate or had she not? That was the question that tormented the Earl's consciousness night and day. Had she so disposed of her wealth that Claverley Castle would be henceforth secured to the house of Clare: or had she left her husband's property back into her husband's family, thereby consigning her own kinsfolk to disaster and ruin, or her goddaughter to a loveless marriage?

Lady Claverley on this score was hardly less anxious than her husband. Though not romantic herself, she could not bear the idea of her daughter's contracting a union which would sacrifice happiness to pecuniary advantage; nor, on the other hand, could she contemplate with equanimity the notion of herself, her husband, and her child being turned out of house and home, and wanting the absolute necessities of life.

Kate herself, too, was not without curiosity. She hated the idea of marriage—she equally hated the idea of leaving her dear old home; and it seemed so easy for Mrs. MacBalloch to have solved both these problems in a satisfactory manner, if only that lady had seen fit so to do.

Perhaps the person least concerned about the contents of the Will was George Despard. His late patroness had always made it clear to him that her kindness would end with her life—that she had no intention of leaving him anything but



a small annuity sufficient to save him from absolute want should his health break down. For the rest, if he wanted money he must work for it, as her late husband had done; and if she had omitted to provide him with a way of making a similar fortune—or, indeed, any fortune at all—George was sufficiently just to own that this was quite as much his fault as hers. If he had insisted on adopting a profession and taking his career into his own hands, Mrs. MacBalloch—though she might have grumbled at the time—would most certainly have provided him with the means of so doing. But—with an overscrupulousness that was characteristic of the man—he had chosen to consider it his duty to devote himself to his benefactress as long as she lived, in consideration of the fact that she had adopted and educated him from his birth, though under no obligation to do so; and he was by no means the sort of man to make a sacrifice which he thought himself bound to make, and then to grumble when the bill for the burnt-offering came in. That she did not appreciate his sacrifice had nothing to do with it; Despard was one of the men who do right for its own sake, and not for their own advantage or other people's; and, after all, the efficacy of a sacrifice is not measured by its returns, as is the value of an investment.

An old divine once preached a sermon, the text being, "Whoso giveth to the poor lendeth to the Lord." His sermon consisted of these words: "My friends, you have the means; you have heard the promise: if you are satisfied with the security, down with the dust." But though in this investment there are undoubtedly "safe profits," there are by no means "quick returns." And those men and women who expect their wave-offerings and burnt-sacrifices to bring in a satisfactory half-yearly balance-sheet, will be grievously disappointed.

On the morning after Mrs. MacBalloch's death George had a short interview with Lady Katharine. "I cannot ask your

forgiveness," he said, and his face was as white as marble; "my offence was beyond all pardon, but I wish all the same to express my remorse that I should so far have forgotten myself; and to tell you that the withdrawal of your friendship is nothing more than I richly deserve. I accept my punishment without a murmur—but not, believe me, without many a regret.

But Kate's mood had entirely changed; she was no longer the accomplished coquette or the offended queen of last night; she was merely a warm-hearted girl, still trembling with the shock of having come, for the first time in her life, within the Shadow of the Dark Valley. For the time being the Great Reality had put far from her all shams and all frivolities. What place was there for mirth and banter while the rustling of the wings of the Angel of Death was still quivering in the air? What room was there for anger or bitterness while the footfalls of the Great Reconciler were still resounding on the threshold?

"Oh, please don't be sorry," she cried, stretching out both her hands to George in childish entreaty; "please don't be unhappy about that. I feel just now that little things matter so little, while great things matter so much, that I couldn't bear to know that anybody was worrying and fretting about a little thing like that."

"Did you call it a little thing?" George's voice was thick with emotion. She was more lovable than ever in this new, childlike, spontaneous mood; yet he could not altogether agree with her ideas of proportion.

"Of course it was—compared with what has happened since. I have never come near to Death before, you know; and everything seems little and unimportant beside that."

George thought to himself that there was one thing even stronger than Death. But she did not know it yet, and he dared not teach her.

"Then you forgive me?" was all he said.

“Yes, yes, of course I do; I feel that after what has happened I can never be angry, or silly, or frivolous again.” So for the time being they became friends.

Mrs. MacBalloch was buried in the little churchyard which surrounds the fine old Norman church of Dunbrae. There in the shadow of that stately fane, which through nine centuries had testified to those things which are not seen but are eternal, they laid her to await, with a patience she had never learnt in life, the dawning from beyond the Eastern Sea of the Resurrection Morning.

At last it was all over; and the party returned to Ladyhall and assembled for the reading of the Will—that document which might mean so gloriously much or so cruelly little to sundry of those present.

And this is what they heard.

The late Mrs. MacBalloch left an income of five hundred a year, chargeable on the estate, to her secretary, George Despard; and the remainder of her large property, both real and personal, she bequeathed to her goddaughter, the Lady Katharine Clare.

But on one condition, namely that Lady Katharine was either married at the time of the testator's death, or within six months of that date.

If six months after Mrs. MacBalloch's death Lady Kate were still single, she forfeited her right to inherit under the Will; and the property was then to be divided between George Despard and the next of kin to the late Sandy MacBalloch, one Ebenezer Pettigrew.

During such time as should elapse between the death of the testatrix and Lady Katharine's marriage (if the latter were not married at the time of Mrs. MacBalloch's demise), Despard was appointed to manage the estates as he had done heretofore, handing them over to Lady Katharine on the occasion of her marriage, should that take place within the appointed time. If, on the contrary, Lady Kate did not, or

would not, marry, then Mrs. MacBalloch's Scotch estates, with their revenues of some twenty thousand a year, went to Ebenezer Pettigrew; and Mrs. MacBalloch's personalty, amounting to about half a million, was equally divided between him and George Despard.

Thus did the dead hand of her godmother press poor Lady Kate still further towards the goal which she hated—the goal of marriage; and thus did Katharine MacBalloch still make her domineering spirit felt by those with whom she had had to do.

Lady Kate was frankly furious—and not unnaturally so. She felt that a ghastly trick had been played upon her—as, indeed, it had. What right had the living and the dead thus to conspire against her to force her into some marriage which she dreaded and disliked? Instead of helping her, as she had fondly hoped it would, to retain her beloved Claverley Castle without the hated expedient of marriage, her godmother's Will had made matters worse for her all round: it had increased tenfold the desirability and importance of the step from which she shrank, and it tended to hurry on the taking of that step to an alarming degree. Now she must not only marry, but she must marry at once, or else she must lose Claverley and all the things that made life delightful to her. Surely it was a sad and unwarrantable strait for any young woman to be placed in by a dead hand.

Like all wilful people, Mrs. MacBalloch had only seen one side of the question—and that was her own. She was so much impressed by the desirability of marriage in a woman's career that she did not allow for the fact that the married life, as much as the religious life, is a distinct vocation. Good wives—like inferior poets—are born, not made; and really typical old maids are the same. Have we not, all in our time, come across married women, the mothers of large families, who are, nevertheless, old maids to their dying day—with their primness and prudery, and devotion to detail? And have we not

also, over and over again, met with large-hearted, tender-natured women, whom all men admire and reverence, and all children cling to and love, and yet who by some strange accident of fate or fortune, or by some unaccountable freak of chance or choice, are destined to lead single lives? Wherefore it behoves us all to be careful ere we take it upon ourselves to play the part of our neighbours' Providence, or to swear ourselves in, for the time being, as special constables of Fate.

Lord Claverley's feelings were mingled. If on the one hand he was delighted at the idea of his daughter's inheriting so large a fortune, on the other he was mortally offended that she should be subjected to what he considered a degrading condition. Nevertheless, he argued with his usual inconsistency, Kate must marry sooner or later : her hereditary title demanded it ; and it was worth while hurrying on an inevitable occurrence for the sake of estates bringing in twenty thousand a year, with half a million in addition to clear off the encumbrances of the Claverley property.

Lady Claverley, too, was divided in her mind, as was her lord and master. Naturally, she viewed the defects of persons related to his side of the house with less leniency than the faults of those connected with her own : and she considered that Katharine MacBalloch was to blame in attaching such a condition to her bequest. But her daughter's eventual marriage was as much a foregone conclusion with her as with her husband : and now that Kate could please herself in the matter of choice, and was bound merely to marry a man, and not to marry money, her mother did not see that she had much to complain of. Mrs. MacBalloch had laid no restrictions whatever upon Kate's choice : as long as she married at all, it did not matter to her godmother whom ; and with all the noble army of fascinating and ineligible suitors to choose from, surely Kate would be hard to please if she could not find one to her taste ! Lady Claverley had been young herself once

upon a time: so she knew, better than anyone could tell her, that though millionaires and eldest sons had their undoubted limitations, there were no bounds whatever set to the charms and fascinations of penniless subalterns and younger sons. One of the numerous daughters of the late impecunious Marquis of Dunbar could not allow her thoughts to wander into these dangerous and delightful preserves: "Poor dear mamma" saw to that. But Kate, lucky Kate, could afford to marry the very poorest of church mice or the very smartest of young soldiers if so it pleased her; and her mother could not repress a faint sigh of envy as she thought of this. But the Countess speedily strangled the sigh in its earliest stage, and turned her wifely thoughts to a dutiful contemplation of how wise Claverley always was in forming his own judgment, and how kind in always following hers. Lady Claverley was a good woman and an excellent wife.

But the person who was most upset by Mrs. MacBalloch's Will was George Despard. The five hundred a year left unreservedly to himself was as much—nay, more—than he had ever expected, and more than fulfilled the statement of his patroness that she would leave him enough to keep him from the workhouse. But the possible inheritance! Two months ago he would have been profoundly indifferent. Money for its own sake was a matter of no moment to him: money that made marriage with Kate a reasonable possibility was quite another thing. But the chance of money which might come to him if Kate did not marry, while her marriage with any other would cause the dream of inheritance to vanish like the baseless fabric of a vision, made a veritable Tantalus of him. True, should Kate marry another—and he had no illusions on the question of her indifference to himself—why then he had little interest in the disposal of Mrs. MacBalloch's fortune. If only she had absolutely left him the share that was now contingently his, he could at least have wooed Kate and put it to the test, and so won or lost it all. But the terms of the Will

placed him in an invidious position with regard to the Claverleys. His influence with Mrs. MacBalloch was well known ; and it seemed as if, smarting under the slight he had received at Lady Kate's hands, he had set—at least partially—her kinswoman against her, and had done so to his own advantage. The date of the Will—a fortnight after the Claverleys' arrival—would lend force to this conjecture. As he brooded over these things, George Despard grew very bitter. Life had been, if not easy for him hitherto, at least not unduly hard. Now, however, fate seemed intent on pressing heavily upon him. And then he thought of the time limit. Supposing after all Lady Kate did not marry within the six months. She had made no secret during the last few days of her kinswoman's anxiety for her marriage, and her resolve not to be forced into it. She was self-willed, Despard knew ; she was quite capable of carrying out her resolve. In that case the money would go to the Pettigrews and himself—while the Claverleys, as he knew very well, would have to give up the Castle. He could, of course, hand over his share to her ; but no, that would not do. She was proud, too, and would accept no pecuniary benefit at his hands. He thought long and deeply. If she remained unmarried—— Suddenly an idea struck him, and a curious smile crossed his face. Yes, that might do, he thought, with a look of triumph in his eyes. “ My Lady Kate, you have had your day of success and pride and superciliousness. A time may come when fate will put it in my power to take a becoming revenge.”

## CHAPTER XI

### WAR TO THE KNIFE

AS was but natural—and unwise—George was very anxious to have an interview with Lady Katharine as soon as possible, in order to convince her, as he imagined, that he had been as ignorant and as innocent as she herself with regard to the contents of Mrs. MacBalloch's Will. During the day of the funeral he found no opportunity of seeing her alone; but the following morning fortune—or was it misfortune?—favoured him, and he came upon Lady Kate sitting disconsolately by herself in the tapestried drawing-room. Thereupon the misguided young man congratulated himself upon his luck, and straightway rushed upon his doom.

“I am very glad to find you alone, Lady Kate,” he began, “as there is something that I must say to you, and say to you at once.”

Lady Kate drew herself up and looked at him defiantly. “My name is Katharine,” was all she said.

George started. Was this the wayward and impulsive creature whom he had held to his heart only a few short days ago, and who had played the part of his wife so charmingly during the comedy and at the supper afterwards? Was this the girl whom under an uncontrollable impulse he had offended apparently past forgiveness; and who had yet so nobly and so sweetly granted him her forgiveness when he had confessed his sin? It seemed incredible that the same woman could be so scornfully proud and so bewitchingly humble. But he was too much in earnest to be baulked by a girl's contempt;



so he went on: "I want to lose no time in telling you, Lady Katharine, that I consider Mrs. MacBalloch's Will iniquitous."

"Indeed," remarked Kate ironically.

"Of course I do; you can't imagine that I approve of it?"

"I am afraid you underrate my powers of imagination, Mr. Despard."

"What do you mean?"

"My meaning, I should say, is clear enough. The date of the Will shows the hand you had in the matter."

"The date?"

"Yes—a fortnight after we arrived here. I see it all. You were offended at the mistake I made at the station, and this is your revenge."

George gasped. "You don't mean to say—you can't mean that you think *I* had a hand in this Will."

Kate shrugged her shoulders.

"Why deny it? The whole thing is too obvious. I can only congratulate you on your skill—and on your moderation. It was a master-stroke putting in a condition you knew I would not fulfil, and so securing the money."

"You dare to make such an accusation against *me*?" said George haughtily. "You will apologize to me at once for the insult."

"You are acting extremely well," said Kate, with an irritating smile. "Let me again congratulate you—you have made excellent use of the rehearsals."

"Listen to me," he began; and most women would have been afraid of the tone of his voice, it was so ominously quiet. But Kate did not know what fear was. "I swear to you by all I hold sacred that I was as ignorant as a babe of the contents of that Will; and that I would have cut off my right hand sooner than have allowed it to be drawn up, could I have prevented it."

"'Where ignorance is bliss 'tis folly to be wise.' You are to be congratulated, Mr. Despard, on the lack of knowledge

which has redounded so abundantly to your advantage without in the least interfering with the exquisite balance of your conscience. If knowing of Mrs. MacBalloch's excellent intentions would have compelled you to frustrate them to your own disadvantage, how fortunate for you that the dear lady kept you in the dark!"

This was intolerable. Nevertheless George put a strong restraint upon himself, and went on: "I give you my word—and whether you accept it or not is your affair, not mine—that had I known of this abominable intention I would have done everything in my power to prevent its fulfilment. But I did not know."

"So you say." And Kate's smile was by no means a pleasant one.

Then George's rage boiled over. "Do you think me a thief and a liar?"

"I wasn't thinking about you at all. The honesty of the various members of my late godmother's household is a matter of no moment to me."

"Do you mean to say you believe that I used my influence—if I had any—over Mrs. MacBalloch, in order to get a Will made in my interest and against yours?"

"A man is a fool who doesn't look after his own interests, Mr. Despard, and I should be sorry to think you a fool."

Again George controlled himself and spoke quietly. "Then let that be; we will pass on to the next thing I have to say to you."

"By all means; for the time I have to place at your disposal is not unlimited." And Kate glanced at the watch she wore upon her wrist.

The insolence of the action almost maddened George; nevertheless he still held himself together. "You will understand, Lady Katharine, that the bare idea of being benefited myself by your loss of the property is intolerable to me."

"Pardon me, I understand nothing of the kind. I should

have thought any man would have been thankful for a fortune—by whatever means it happened to be obtained.”

“Heaven knows I should be thankful for a fortune. You do not know what it would mean to me! But not obtained in such a way. You do me an injustice—a base and cruel injustice.”

“Possibly. But I confess I have hitherto seen nothing in your behaviour to give the impression that you are such a perfect Bayard up to date.”

George laughed bitterly. “I am no Bayard, Heaven knows! But I am a man, and it would be intolerable to any man to become enriched at the expense of a woman.”

“Indeed. You are fortunate, Mr. Despard, both in your experience of men in general and in your opinion of yourself in particular. You certainly live in a most charming and delightful paradise—of fools.”

Once more Despard strode up and down the room in his rage, and once more he pulled himself together and tried to speak calmly, Kate looking at him meanwhile with that disdainful smile still upon her lips. “It is no good wasting any more words, Lady Katharine.”

“Not the slightest.”

“It is useless, I see, for me to try and convince you that I am not to blame for the indignity that has been put upon you.”

“It has taken you a long time to perceive the obvious, Mr. Despard.”

“Then I will come to the point at once,” said George roughly. “What I want to know is whether you will fulfil Mrs. MacBalloch’s conditions, and secure for yourself the property by marrying me?”

Then it was Kate’s turn to spring to her feet, her eyes blazing. “I see your little game. You make this impertinent, this unheard-of proposal, because you think that in this way you will do considerably better for yourself than you have done already.”

"No," thundered George. "I make it because I love you."

"You want the whole of the property instead of only a portion."

"I don't: I want you."

Kate stamped her foot. "I wonder how you dare," she cried.

"Easily enough," the man answered, with a harsh laugh; "I may not be a gentleman, but I am not a coward. I love you, Lady Katharine, and I am neither ashamed of loving you nor afraid of telling you so."

"It is an insult."

George seized both her hands in his with a fierce grasp, and tall as she was, he towered above her. "Before Heaven you lie, Lady Kate! The love of an honest man is no insult to any woman."

"It is an insult for you to presume to tell me that you love me."

"I don't care. I love you, I love you, I love you!"

"You love my property, you mean—the Ladyhall estate."

"Not I! I love *you*; I love your hair and your eyes and your mouth and your voice and even your temper. I worship you so that I could kiss your dear feet. I love you, Kate; do you hear, I love you? I love you as I love the hope of heaven."

"And I hate you as I hate the fear of hell."

George drew his breath hard, yet he still held her hands in his iron grasp. "Then if my love is an insult, why did you stoop to win it? Surely if it is the low thing that you make out, it was unfit to be even the plaything of so fine a lady."

"How dare you say such things?" cried the girl, trying in vain to take away her hands from him. "I never stooped to win the love of such a man as you!"

"You did; and you know that you did. Do you think I hadn't the wit to see how you laid yourself out to bewitch me and to compel my love? I saw through you, my lady;

saw completely through all your little tricks. It offended your vanity that even such a contemptible worm as myself—your godmother's hired servant—should be able to withstand your charms; so you deliberately set about to conquer me. And I—poor fool that I was!—was clever enough to see through your wiles, and yet not strong enough to resist them. So you succeeded, Lady Katharine, in your admirable, your womanly effort to take a man's heart by force in order that you might break it. I congratulate you on the success of so praiseworthy an attempt. Your egregious vanity once more is justified!"

Kate stood silent and motionless, as if spell-bound by the impassioned torrent of his words.

"And now, forsooth," he went on, "you consider your white hands befouled by touching the very thing that you stooped to pick up. You have no one but yourself to thank! If you had let me alone, I should have been only too thankful to let you alone. I can assure you it was no delight to me, but absolute torture, to see myself chained to the other poor fools who adorn your chariot wheels. I despised myself for having been compelled against my will to love you, even while I was loving you as my own soul."

Then at last Lady Kate found words. "And I conclude you despise yourself even more now."

"Not I!" And George trembled with the intensity of his passion. "Now I despise you."

Kate's eyes blazed like stars. "Me? You dare to despise me?"

"With all my heart. The woman who deliberately plays with a man's love deserves nothing less than all men's scorn."

"I will never forgive you as long as I live."

"I don't ask you to forgive me; I ask you to marry me."

"I would sooner die than marry you. Do you think that I am the sort of woman who would marry for the sake of money a man whom she detests? You judge me by yourself, I see, Mr. Despard."

George loosed his grip of her hand so suddenly that she almost fell backwards. "Do you really mean that?"

"I do: every word of it."

The passion died out of Despard's face and voice, and a deep sadness took its place. "Do you mean that it was all play, Kate—that there was no grain of love for me hidden among the chaff of your amusement and sport? I sometimes thought that there must be, or else you couldn't have played the part so well."

Kate laughed. "Then you were mistaken. It was your vanity—not mine—that played you false this time."

Still George pleaded. "Oh, Kate, Kate, have pity on me! If there was the least spark of love for me in your heart, I would fan it and shield it till it grew into a flame. My darling, I will make you love me, if only you will let me try."

"You flatter yourself, Mr. Despard."

"Did you never love me at all, not even for a passing moment? Oh, Kate, Kate, tell me that you are not the heartless coquette you have pretended to be."

"I don't tell lies to suit my own purpose."

George swallowed the insult and pleaded once more.

"Then did you never love me?"

"Never. I hated you and despised you from the moment I met you at the station, and I shall hate and despise you as long as I live."

"Is this your last word?"

"It is."

"Then is it to be war between us and not love?"

"Yes, war to the knife."

"Then that is all I have to say. Go your own way, Lady Katharine, and I will go mine. And may God forgive you for having broken an honest man's heart, and laid his life waste, and turned all its sweetness into gall."

And with that he turned on his heel and went out of the room, leaving Katharine alone with her triumph.

## CHAPTER XII

### AFTER THE BATTLE

LADY KATE was left alone with her triumph. Yet as she sat in the tapestried drawing-room and communed with herself on the stormy interview, the fruits of her victory did not appear very substantial. They had seemed fair enough in the first flush of success ; but now, as she set herself to enjoy them, they began most unaccountably to crumble into dust. True, she had humbled the officious and offending secretary ; true, he had declared himself to be her devoted slave, only to be spurned by her pretty feet. But, after all, what a poor triumph it was ! and how paltry were the means by which it had been attained ! As she recalled the injurious words she had used, the insinuations she had not scrupled to make, Kate blushed for herself. Of course, she had never meant the things she had said, as she very well knew as they came back to her memory—though they had come naturally enough from her tongue in her rage and disappointment. Womanlike, she had not only said more than she had any idea of saying until carried out of herself by the excitement of the moment, but, womanlike, she was all the more angry with him because she had been unjust. She was filled with remorse so far as she herself was concerned, but not with penitence as regards the man. The desire to humble herself and to make amends might possibly come, but the time for this was not yet. She had to find an excuse for herself—and the only way to do so was to find further cause for blame in him. And this she did easily enough. He should never have come worrying her at such

a time ; he might have known that she could not stand nonsense just now ; and what did it matter what his attitude with regard to the Will was ? The man was utterly self-centred ; who troubled about his thoughts or opinions ?

And then Kate remembered, with a touch of gratification which was balm to her wounded soul, that she had conquered after all. Her adversary, however brutal, however undeserving, however indifferent he had seemed, was still human. He had felt her power ; he had succumbed to her attractions. Kate, young as she was, was not likely to make any mistake on an important point like this. He loved her—and she knew it, in spite of her accusation of self-interest in his declaration.

But my Lady Kate's troubles were not yet over. Just as she had begun to find solace in the comfortable glow of gratified vanity, and to quiet her conscience by the easy method of dismissing unpleasant pricks with the reflection that she would make it all right with that disagreeable secretary some day or other, the door opened, and her father came in with stately stride. Marching solemnly across the room, he slowly sank into the easiest chair he could find, and gravely shaking his head, gazed at his daughter with melancholy and tender interest.

"Well, papa, what is the matter?" exclaimed Kate somewhat impatiently. She had a presentiment that the Earl was on the war-path so far as her peace of mind was concerned.

"My child," quoth he in tragic accents, "I am distressed beyond measure at this incredible, this unexampled, this iniquitous Will to which your cousin Katharine has subscribed her name."

"You can't be more aggravated than I am, if that is what you mean."

"That is not at all what I mean, my child. And you will allow me to point out that aggravation is not the feeling with which a testamentary document should inspire you. It is



pity, not anger, it is sorrow, not resentment, that fills my heart as I think of my lamented cousin."

"I hope she's having a warm time of it, wherever she is," muttered Kate vindictively.

Fortunately the Earl did not catch this remark, or he would have administered to the culprit a well-deserved if long-winded rebuke. As it was, he sat silent for a minute; then he burst out desperately—

"Kate, my child, something must be done."

"I quite agree with you, papa; but it's not so easy to see what that something is. We can't, I suppose, make out that Cousin Katharine was cranky, and not fit to sign a will?"

The Earl shook his head hopelessly.

"Out of the question, my love, out of the question. Such a disposition of the property, or rather such a condition attached to the disposition of the property, would certainly suggest a doubt as to the sanity of the testatrix, but not such a doubt as the Court could possibly entertain."

"Then that is because the Court is composed of men," said Kate. "Any woman would see with half an eye that Cousin Katharine must have been out of her senses to make such a will. But that's the way with judges; you never get justice from them!"

"That may be, my love, that may well be!" said the Earl suavely; "there is, I believe, excellent authority for the classic statement that 'the law is a ass.'"

"That's a very sensible remark of yours, papa," cried Lady Kate admiringly. She was not a competition wallah, and fondly imagined that the epigram was spontaneous. "But if the law won't help us, what can be done?"

"There is only one course open," pronounced the Earl solemnly. "As I said at Claverley three months ago, you must marry." The Earl uttered these authoritative words in his deepest accents, so as to lend all pomp and dignity to the parental dictum.

"I can't, and I won't," replied the girl mutinously.

"Yes, my love, you will," said her father persuasively; "it is only a little thing after all. I assure you that many girls have married before this, and have found the holy estate quite tolerable. It is, indeed, a common course of action. I have frequently come across such cases."

"I hate men," burst out Kate; "they are stupid and selfish and obstinate; they only care for themselves and their dinner and their sports. I hate the sight of them. And I won't marry one. So there!"

"You forget, my child, that the case is somewhat different from what it was when we discussed it at Claverley. *Then* the question was one of marrying money, and I admit that, desirable as such a course seemed, and bound as I felt to commend it to you, I had no small sympathy with you in your repugnance to what might not unjustly be regarded as a sordid act. But now all you have to do is to marry someone or other; the person is quite a secondary matter. He may be a belted earl, or what is, I believe, familiarly known as a detrimental. Should a handsome young fellow—of good birth, of course, yet with a scanty purse—attract your fancy, no monetary question need arise. You can pick and choose, my love, you can pick and choose!"

This was a new light on the subject, and Kate visibly softened.

"You seem very anxious to get rid of me, papa," she said.

"Nay, my child, you do me injustice. How can I look forward with satisfaction to the prospect of being deprived of the companionship of one who is the light of my eye, the joy of my life? It is only because it is for your good, and for the preservation for you of your ancestral home, that I can steel myself to the loss which your marriage would entail."

And the Earl drew forth a large silk pocket-handkerchief, wherewith to conceal his emotion.

"In that case, papa, if you can't bear the thought of part-

ing with me, why not keep me with you always?" Then flinging herself in her father's arms, she cried, "Oh, papa, I don't want to marry. Keep me with you always, papa, always!"

At this appeal the Earl's emotion became genuine. He kissed his daughter fondly, and tried to comfort her.

"It is because it is for your future good, my love. I don't ask you to marry anyone you don't love. You have still six months, and surely in that time you, with your beauty and charm, will meet with someone worthy of you; one with whom you can be happy. If not, I will urge you no further, but the old house will be gone—will be gone!"

"Papa, I will try, I really will; but do not hurry me."

"Certainly not. You shall have as much time as you like. But still you will remember, you *must* marry within six months. Come, my love, sit down with me here, and let us talk it over. Suppose you go to stay at Elnagar. Your mother shall write to your Aunt Dunbar. I know they are having a series of house-parties, and you will meet many young men, suitable for the purpose. Now if you will only promise me that you will not begin with a prejudice against everyone, I am sure you will charm some nice young fellow, and live with him happily ever after."

Kate sighed deeply. "If it must be so, it must. Yes, papa, I'll do my best. But I'd far rather stay at home with you and mother."

With this the Earl had to be content.

A few days later Lady Kate departed for Elnagar, under the escort of Sapphira and the discreet Tiffany. After seeing their daughter off, with many prayers uttered and unuttered that she might find a husband and thus secure a fortune for herself and save the family home from the desecration of an alien and possibly plebeian occupation, the Earl and Countess returned to Claverley Castle to face the alarums and excursions of the "faithful Charles," and the incursion of the rain,

despite Mrs. Brown's heroic exertions with the baths, as best they might.

Ladyhall, so lately the scene of brightness and festivity, crowded with a brilliant throng of gay revellers, was thus left deserted, and George Despard found himself alone. How desperately alone he was, none knew but himself. How bitterly sore at heart, how grimly at war with the world at large and Lady Kate in particular, how doggedly resolved that come what may *he* would not benefit to the disadvantage of the woman he loved and who spurned him, he hardly himself knew. Still, he could have given some interesting details on these points. But he was dimly conscious of a dull pain at his heart, and went about his duties with an apathy which was strangely inconsistent with his usual cheerful energy. In time the numbness passed away, and he began to feel the biting agony of his wounds. Then he set his teeth, and vowed to himself he would tear from his heart all memory of the woman who had bewitched him. But all the time he knew that he was a fool to think that possible. Then he would ponder, as he rode round the estate, over the future. Kate would be sure to marry, so he said to himself; she would hardly keep the determination she had hastily expressed when he last saw her, and sacrifice her future to a whim. She could scarcely be so unwise, from a worldly point of view, as that. No; some handsome fortune-hunter would turn up and contrive to please her wilful fancy. He was a fool to imagine that the Will would have any other effect than that contemplated by the imperious testatrix. But if it should not be so? If, after six months, Lady Kate still kept to her determination to remain single? Why, then—why, then—the next of kin should not have the estate! There was still a weapon in his armoury of which Lady Kate little knew, and despite all her obstinacy, she should enter into her inheritance. At least so George Despard promised himself, with a bitter smile upon his handsome face.

Meanwhile Kate herself was having what is known as a real good time (falsely so called) at Elnagar, little dreaming of what was passing in Despard's mind—indeed, never giving a thought more than she could help to that melancholy young man. The remembrance of him and his misdeeds was too little to her taste to be indulged in with unnecessary frequency, and only led to an increased feeling of bitter resentment. Her aunt received her with open arms. The Marchioness had been duly informed by her sister-in-law of the terms of the Will, and of the hopes entertained that Kate might find among the guests at Elnagar one who would enable her to fulfil the requisite condition. The Countess had implored her aid in this matter, and had carefully coached her in the way whereby Kate's foolish obstinacy might be overcome. Lady Dunbar had formed her own opinion on this point; she had her plan of campaign, and preferred to carry it out in her own way. It was a simple one. Mrs. MacBalloch had tried to force Kate into marriage by bullying her. The Marchioness would try the opposite plan: she would be amiability itself, and be especially careful to allow no suspicion of an iron hand to penetrate through the thick velvet of the glove.

After the season of stress and storm at Ladyhall, her aunt's kindness and gentle consideration were very grateful to Kate. No doubt she had enjoyed the strife of wills; a contest with a capable foe, who hit hard and did not shrink from either the retort courteous or the countercheck quarrelsome, never came amiss to Kate. But she was tired of conflict: the sudden death of her kinswoman had been a greater shock to her than she was aware of; it was the first time she had ever come across Death as a living reality; and we are never quite the same after this experience has once been ours. Then the reading of the Will, the stormy scene with George, the pricks of conscience which she could not altogether stifle, however much she tried to repress her remembrance, her father's anxiety—all these had tried her nerves. But above all there

was the civil war in her own heart—the desire, at times the overmastering desire, to save her old home from desecration; and, on the other hand, her aversion from marriage, from the surrender of her freedom, from the submission of her will to another.

Hitherto Kate had lived a free, irresponsible, light-hearted existence. Like other girls, she had had her dreams of marriage, and a gallant lover; but they were dreams only—a something in the distance, pleasurable, and a little bit frightening—all the more pleasurable on account of the undefined dread, so long as that something remained afar off. So, too, Death had been a fact which she had acknowledged, just as many recite the Creed. It never occurs to them to doubt the facts contained therein—still less does it occur to them that the facts have any relation whatever to their own life and conduct. So, too, it had never occurred to Kate that Death could in any way touch her. She had often spoken in careless jest—the result of want of thought rather than callousness—of the prospect of her kinswoman's death and her expectations therefrom. But now Kate found herself face to face with the realities of life. Death had touched her with his icy hand, and she knew that the old easy life of careless irresponsibility was over. She resented the knowledge; she struggled fiercely in her own heart, but none knew better than she that such struggle naught availed. So she threw herself into the social life at Elnagar, and tried her utmost to forget the events of the last few weeks, and to live in the present, careless of the future. In such circumstances the soothing tactics of Lady Dunbar were perhaps the best that could have been adopted. Anyway Kate felt the kindness, and was much comforted. So consoling, indeed, did she find her hostess that she began to pour out her troubles into her sympathetic ear. When Kate deplored the apparent necessity of letting Claverley Castle to some rich shopkeeper, the Marchioness would remark in soothing accents that it was

certainly distressing, yet many other noblemen of ancient lineage had suffered a like inconvenience ; and, after all, very respectable people could be discovered here and there in the commercial world, and no doubt they would be fortunate enough to find an eligible tenant. Then Kate would remark, with a prodigious sigh and a touching resignation, that she supposed she owed it to her parents to avert the catastrophe by marrying. Whereupon her aunt would reply that Kate would certainly be wise if she were to adopt this course ; that marriage was an honourable estate, and one to which girls might look forward as a natural incident in their lives. At this Kate would fiercely remark that she hated men, and she would like to see the man whom she would swear to honour and obey. With a mournful shake of her head, Lady Dunbar agreed with her ; men were by no means better than they should be ; it was no doubt a ridiculous thing to put such a word as *obey* in the marriage service ; no nice man would ever expect such a thing from his wife ; still Kate was no doubt right in thinking that husbands as a rule were queer creatures, and the less a girl had to do with them the better.

But although the Marchioness nobly carried out her policy of never thwarting her niece, she took very good care always to have a good-looking, desirable young man on the spot, and to give the said young man every opportunity of making himself agreeable to the future Countess and presumptive heiress. And very agreeable these young men made themselves—alas ! with little comfort to their own peace of mind. The natural reaction came to Kate. She threw aside—for the time—all remembrance of the sad events that had so impressed her. She flung herself heart and soul into any amusement that might occur ; she sought oblivion in the Lethe of constant gaiety and frivolity. She flirted outrageously with the eligible bachelors sedulously provided by her hostess ; and when they became serious in their attentions, she laughed in their faces with a pretty insolence that was maddening and yet bewitch-

ing. She out-Kated the Kate who had wrought such havoc among the susceptible hearts of Salopshire. As she queened it among the guests at Elnagar, easily triumphing over rival beauties, she was pronounced by the men charming, adorable, fascinating, and to be desired above all other maidens—but they always finished their panegyric with an ominous *but*.

And through it all in her heart of hearts she was miserable. The new feelings aroused by her first contact with trouble were dormant, not dead. They were crushed down by Kate in her mad revolt, but she had not succeeded in killing them. She well knew the better way, even while she so obstinately followed the lower road. She had no illusions about herself. And so the days and the weeks rolled on; and she felt as though condemned to death, with the fatal hour approaching with slow but inevitable steps. To the world at large she seemed the apotheosis of brilliant success and happiness. Yet Kate cried in her heart, "Vanity of vanities," and was a miserable woman.



## CHAPTER XIII

### THE PETTIGREWS

**I**N a large and gloomy house, situated in a large and gloomy suburb not five miles from the Marble Arch, Mr. and Mrs. Ebenezer Pettigrew and their son and daughter sat at meat. The late Mrs. MacBalloch's Will had produced almost as great an effect upon the Pettigrews as upon the Claverleys; and by no means a more agreeable one.

If Mrs. MacBalloch had left nothing at all to the house of Pettigrew, it would never have occurred to them to make any complaint or to discover any cause of offence; for although Ebenezer was actually the defunct Sandy's next of kin, he was merely a cousin on the mother's side, and had no legal claim at all on the fortune which MacBalloch had created for himself out of nothingness, and had left to his well-born widow to dispose of as she thought fit. But because Mrs. MacBalloch had left them the off-chance of a very large fortune indeed, they were mortally and bitterly offended that she had not made this off-chance an absolute certainty. - Wherein the Pettigrews were in no wise different from the rest of mankind who are concerned in the bequeathing and the inheriting of money.

Ebenezer was the sort of man who is always described as "having an eye to the main chance." The other eye, whenever he had time to attend to it, he fixed upon things above. Whether it was owing to this dual point of mental view—or whether it was merely a personal defect inherited from an unbeautiful ancestry—who shall say? But the fact remains

that the orbs of Ebenezer's flesh were as twofold in their range as the orbs of Ebenezer's spirit. In short, he squinted.

This slight defect in Mr. Pettigrew's personal appearance conveyed the impression to those about him that when he was apparently looking one way, he was in reality looking quite another; and in this they did him no injustice. But the remarkable thing was that by vainly trying to take in other people, he successfully took in himself. He actually believed he was all that he pretended to be.

His profession was what is usually known as "sharp practice"; his pastime was the study—or rather the exposition—of theology. He had a wonderful facility for imputing motives to an overruling Power, Whom he never referred to more explicitly than by the term, "Those Who know better than we do"; and he gave the impression that in thus placing himself (as "we") second in the scale of omniscience, he erred on the side of humility and self-depreciation. But it was noteworthy that Those Who knew better than Mr. Pettigrew, merely differed from him in degree, and never in kind, of knowledge—according, that is to say, to Mr. Pettigrew's own exposition; otherwise, of course, he would not have admitted that They "knew better"—or even so well. He apparently regarded Eternal Wisdom as having nothing more to do than to second the resolutions and support the amendments of Ebenezer Pettigrew; in short, to grant a sort of royal assent to any suggestions that he thought fit to inculcate and carry through. His nominal calling was that of a stock-broker.

The chosen helpmeet of this worthy man was a tall, gaunt woman, whom he took to wife some time after she had passed her *première jeunesse*. As he gracefully put it during the days of their engagement, "Those Who knew better than we do had seen fit to withhold from Ann Pinchard the fatal gift of beauty." They had. Of that the most casual observer could not for a moment entertain a doubt. But though beauty had

been withheld from Ann, wealth had not. Her father, the inventor of an innocuous patent medicine, had amassed a considerable fortune thereby; and this none knew better than Ebenezer.

Mrs. Pettigrew was a worthy woman, an indefatigable novel reader, and a good wife; but she had one fatal defect, and that was an overwhelming sense of her own gentility. In most people gentility, if they possess it at all, is a somewhat passive and negative gift; but Ann had it in an active, an inflammatory, a positively virulent form. In her it did not merely mean the absence of vulgarity; it meant a distinct thing in itself—a terrible, positive, blood-curdling thing, which made even vulgarity seem attractive by comparison. There never was a moment in Mrs. Pettigrew's life when she was absolutely natural—never a moment when she left off strenuously behaving herself and being actively genteel. She always maintained—in and out of season—that she had “noble blood in her veins”; though how it had got there was a mystery which even she never succeeded in elucidating. But given that it was there, as she said, why couldn't she let it alone for a bit, instead of introducing it into everything, as if she had lived in Egypt at the time of the First Plague?

The results of this somewhat uninteresting union were twofold, namely, a son called Samuel, a promising youth of some five-and-twenty summers, whose powers of contradiction almost crossed the border-line of genius; and a daughter, Matilda, four years older than Samuel, whose youthfulness was as obtrusive as her mother's good breeding.

“Doubtless,” remarked Mr. Pettigrew, rubbing his hands together in a pleasing way that he had, “all that happens is for the best, or it would not be permitted to transpire; but I cannot—nay, I cannot—commend the disposition of property dictated by our late cousin, Mrs. MacBalloch, in her last Will and Testament.”

“Alas! papa,” sighed his better-half, “your words are only

too true. Who was Katharine MacBalloch that she dared to permit some unknown damsel to stand between the children of a Pinchard and their rights?"

"The old girl had a perfect right to do what she liked with her own," argued Samuel.

"No, Samuel," replied his father, "that is not so. Money is nobody's own—it is given to us as a sacred trust—and therefore the late Mrs. MacBalloch had no right whatsoever to dispose of her fortune save in the proper or, I may say, the legitimate direction." By which, of course, he meant into the pocket of Ebenezer Pettigrew.

"And how my children would have graced a fortune!" exclaimed Mrs. Pettigrew, lifting her eyes upwards, and apparently addressing a pair of enlarged photographs of her late parents hanging upon the opposite wall. "The Pinchards are fitted to adorn any position; there are no social heights too perilous for them to attain."

"All the same, ma," persisted Samuel, delighted to have found so easily a strong and enduring bone of contention, "the old girl had a perfect right to do what she liked with her own."

His mother removed her glance from her dead parents to her living son. "Ah, Samuel, *you* to say that—you who ought to have been Mrs. MacBalloch's heir, ruling over that kingly mansion in the far north—you with the Pinchard temper and the Pinchard nose!"

"Blow the Pinchard nose!" Samuel rudely exclaimed.

His mother proceeded implicitly to obey him. The slightest shadow of disrespect towards the Pinchard blood—even from those who were impregnated with the sacred fluid—invariably reduced her to tears.

"Good gracious, ma, never mind!" cried her daughter. "For goodness' sake, don't cry."

"It pains me—it pains me inexpressibly—to hear my children speak scornfully of their great heritage—the heritage

of the Pinchard blood," groaned Mrs. Pettigrew; "that blood which has been shed so freely on the various battlefields of England—at Agincourt and Cressy and Waterloo!"

Samuel uttered a loud guffaw. "Not one of which is in England at all. Well done, ma! It seems to me that the Pinchard blood may be nuts on history, but at geography it's a gone coon!"

—Matilda giggled her applause. "Oh, Sam, what things you say!"

But Mrs. Pettigrew had not battered for long years upon the *Family Herald* for nothing. "I repeat," she said, drying her pale grey eyes, "that I cannot bear to hear my children speak disrespectfully of their ancestry. Noble blood is a priceless gift, and ought to be regarded as such. How often must I remind you that the Pinchards are originally a Huguenot family that came over with William the Conqueror; and their name is derived from an old French word—*pincer*, to seize hold of—because they grasped so much land, and kept it, at the time of that distinguished monarch?"

"And they seem to have been on the pinch ever since," added the incorrigible Sam.

Here Mr. Pettigrew interposed. "Hush, Sam, don't vex your mamma; though for my part I think it is dangerous and somewhat carnally minded to set so much store upon the mere accident of birth."

"Birth is no accident—no mere incident in one's career," exclaimed Mrs. Pettigrew, it must be admitted with some truth. "It is the very foundation and groundwork of our characters. The manner of men from whom we are descended decides to a great extent the manner of men that we are. I am what I am because my ancestors were what they were. It was countless generations of long-forgotten Pinchards that laid the foundations of my present character as it is now."

"By Jove, ma, you seem to have as many foundation-stones as a Nonconformist chapel!"

"Peace, Samuel! I repeat that I and my children are but the coping-stones of an edifice which generations of Pinchards have built up—the edifice of the Pinchard character; we are but the capitals of pillars, whose foundations were laid by the Pinchards who lived in the days of Elizabeth."

"Then all I can say is that the Pinchards who lived in the days of Elizabeth were precious poor architects."

"Samuel," retorted Samuel's mother, "in insulting my ancestors you insult me, who am but their result—their effect—their inevitable consequence." Again she lifted her eyes to the enlarged photographs, and sighed.

"No offence to you, ma, I'm sure. I should no more dream of thinking you were the same as those old Elizabethan chaps than I should dream of thinking to-day's potato-pie was the same as last Sunday's dinner. Oh no, by no means, not at all!" And Sam cheerfully winked across the table at his sister.

"Oh, Sammy, what things you say!" the latter repeated, vainly endeavouring to stifle her merriment. Poor Matilda was always torn asunder by a natural desire to dissolve into laughter at what she considered her brother's exuberant wit, and a laudable intention to keep, as far as in her lay, the first Commandment with promise.

"Maud, do not encourage Samuel in his fatuous folly," said her mother sternly. Mrs. Pettigrew always called her daughter by the French form of her somewhat ordinary name, taking as her precedent the Empress-mother of King Henry II.

"Oh no! ma, certainly not." And Matilda relapsed again into dutiful solemnity.

"I repeat," said Mrs. Pettigrew, "that Katharine Mac-Balloch had no right to put this insult on the descendants of the Pinchards and thus to defraud them of their natural inheritance." In this good lady's imagination—so successfully trained by serial and ephemeral fiction—Samuel had already acquired the position of an undoubted heir-at-law,

feloniously ousted from his rightful place by a rank supplanter. "This beautiful Scottish mansion was my son's by right, with all the lands and money that appertain to it; and bitterly does my mother-heart resent that a proud and haughty stranger—daughter though she be of a hundred earls—should come between my child and his inheritance." Mrs. Pettigrew was thoroughly enjoying herself. This present incident—as seen through her mental eye—was quite fit for publication in any sensational journal.

"Katharine MacBalloch has gone to her account," said Mr. Pettigrew in his most unctuous manner, "where she will doubtless reap the fit and proper punishment of her unjustifiable disposition of her property. It is not for us to judge her." (Here Ebenezer's overflowing Christian charity almost carried him away.) "Let her rest in peace." (The last thing he would have wished her to do, all the same, after she had made such a will.) "But let us look to our own souls, and beware lest the love of money is engendering in us feelings contrary to our Christian profession and calling—lest our natural disappointment at the loss of what was our own is leading us into uncharitable thoughts with regard to those who have supplanted us. Nevertheless I cannot but feel that I should do far more good with this money than will the frivolous daughter of an ancient and degenerate house."

"It is hard for a mother's heart to forgive those who have injured her children," said Mrs. Pettigrew, inwardly pluming herself upon the dramatic power both of the sentiment and of her expression of it. She was feeling—and speaking—exactly as an outraged mother in the *London Journal* or *Bow Bells* would speak; therefore, for the nonce, she was content.

"Quite true, my love, quite true; nevertheless Christianity compels us to perform this hard task, and we have no option but to obey. Therefore I feel it my duty—my bounden duty—to forgive those bloated aristocrats who have come between us and our rights."

“Very noble of you, Ebenezer! But, remember you are not a mother,” groaned Mrs. Pettigrew, apparently overwhelmed by the responsibilities and temptations of her office.

Her husband did not attempt to dispute this obvious statement.

“Neither are you a Pinchard,” added the lady, feeling exactly as if she were a Roman matron, and Sammy had been brought home upon his shield.

This likewise passed unchallenged.

“Therefore,” continued Sammy’s mother, reaching her climax, “Christian behaviour comes easy to you, Ebenezer; but the Pinchards are cast in a sterner and more pagan mould.” She spoke as if Christian behaviour were an amiable weakness, practised only by persons of plebeian origin. In fact that was how it was usually treated in the literary organs which she patronized.

“Yes, Ann, I shall forgive these Claverleys—I shall forgive them from the bottom of my heart,” continued her husband, thinking that, with a little judicious management, considerable money might be made out of the incident, even though Lady Katharine fulfilled the condition of Mrs. MacBalloch’s will. “Nay, more,” he went on, “I shall not only forgive, I shall forget; I shall approach them upon a footing of good fellowship; I shall treat them as friends.”

But Mrs. Pettigrew was revelling in her wrongs. “My poor, ruined children,” she exclaimed, gazing with watery eyes at her offspring, who were engaged in silently fulfilling the claims of two by no means small appetites. “My heart is too full to tell you even half of what I feel.”

“Same here! only in my case it’s the mouth and not the heart that’s too full,” replied Samuel genially; whilst Matilda nearly choked in her endeavour to laugh and swallow at the same time.

“I am thankful that dear papa is not spared to see this day,” continued Mrs. Pettigrew in a mournful voice, gazing with a



rapt expression of countenance at the large photograph of the departed medicine-maker, as she raised her apparently heart-felt though irrelevant *Te Deum*.

“I fear there is no hope but that the young woman will marry during the appointed time,” sighed Mr. Pettigrew: “such is the ingrained depravity of the human heart! But Those Who know better than we do, saw fit to make the aristocracy thus; and it is not for us to complain. Nevertheless the Earl must see that some compensation is due to my disappointed and supplanted family: and I shall expect him to make such compensation without delay.”

Then a great idea was suddenly vouchsafed to Mrs. Pettigrew—an idea born of much sensational literature. “There is only one compensation that would satisfy my wounded maternal heart,” she said, “and that is that Samuel himself should wed this young woman, and so restore its rights to the Pinchard family.”

“Good gracious, ma, what wonderful thoughts come into your head!” exclaimed Matilda; while Sammy himself fairly choked outright with combined excess of amazement and cold ham.

But Mr. Pettigrew grasped the notion at once in all its significance; and made up his mind on the spot that he would, as he expressed it to himself, “work it,” or be ——— what he devoutly hoped Mrs. MacBalloch was.

“A capital idea, my dear; what an imagination you have! It is indeed a gift for which to be thankful, a vivid imagination such as yours. Yes, yes, Samuel shall unite the properties and do away with the family feud by marriage with Lady Katharine Clare. And as a token of my absolute forgiveness of that young woman, I shall graciously receive her as a daughter-in-law.”

## CHAPTER XIV

### ELNAGAR

“**I** WONDER if life really is worth living after all,” remarked Lady Katharine Clare to a company of select friends who were lunching together among the heather on the moors of Elnagar. It was late in the season, and the purple was fast fading into a russet brown; but here and there were patches of bracken which shone like burnished gold; and the hills still wrapped around them some remnants of their royal purple, just to show how glorious had been those better days which they once had seen.

The ladies of the party had been walking all the morning with the guns; and now both the sportsmen and their attendant nymphs had assembled to partake of Lady Dunbar’s most excellent lunch. The cheerful assembly consisted of Kate and Sapphira, chaperoned by Lady Dunbar’s married daughter, Lady Jean Hannington; also of Sir Godfrey Hannington, husband of the above; the Marquis of Taybridge, son of the Duke of Deeside; Captain O’Flynn, eldest son of the Baron of the name; and a certain Mr. Wilkinson, a very young member of the House of Commons, who—in his own opinion at least—was more distinguished and important than all the rest of that weighty assembly put together.

“I think that depends upon whether you make it worth living,” replied Sapphira, “by leaving undone all you ought to do, and doing all you ought not.”

“To be or not to be, that is the question,” said Mr. Wilkinson, with all the sententiousness of politically success-

ful youth. He could no more have resisted a trite quotation or an obvious retort than he could have imagined that the leaders of his party knew better than—or even as well as—he did.

“According to Sapphira, to behave or not to behave, that is the question,” said Lady Kate.

“It is always better to behave than not,” argued Lady Jean. “I’ve tried first one, and then the other, so I know.”

“You never tried the one, to my knowledge,” retorted her husband, with a laugh.

“Probably not, dear. I always suit myself to my company, and I think it is one of the first duties of a wife to adapt herself to her husband and his friends—most especially to his friends.”

Sir Godfrey’s huge sides shook with mirth. His admiration for his wife’s intellectual powers reached the point of worship.

By this time Lord Taybridge, who always moved slowly and surely, being a sort of conversational tortoise, crawled into the lists. “I remember that someone—I regret that I cannot recall at the moment who it was—remarked that the answer to the question, ‘Is life worth living?’ depends upon the digestion. It was considered a very witty remark. I admit that I cannot myself quite see the wit”—he pronounced it “wut”—“but to me it seems a very comprehensive and sensible sentiment.”

“You have quoted it wrongly,” said Mr. Wilkinson, who was ever ready to put people right; “the original aphorism was that, ‘Is life worth living?’ depends upon the liver.”

“That,” replied the corrected Marquis, “is a distinction without a difference. Digestion means the same as liver, and is—to my mind—a far more euphonious expression. I repeat that whether life is worth living or not depends upon the digestion; and I fully agree with the remark.”

“But where is the joke when you put it that way?” asked Kate.

“There is no joke when I put it any way, as far as I can see: I distinctly said that there was not, if you remember. I subscribe to the sense of the remark, but I fail to see any wit in it.”

“You don’t like jokes, do you, old man?” said Hannington in a soothing voice.

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say I don’t like them,” replied Taybridge cautiously, “when they are there; but it is no use pretending that I can see a joke when there is no joke to be seen: now is it?”

Sir Godfrey cordially agreed with him. “None at all, old fellow.”

“But I wouldn’t say I dislike them,” Lord Taybridge continued, “or even disapprove of them. In fact I’ve heard one or two that have almost made me laugh. My father tells a capital story of a man who saw his footman tumble down with the tea-tray, or something, and said it was a *lapsus linguæ*; and then another man—I forget if it was any relation of the first man, but it might have been—made his footman tumble down with all the breakfast-things the next morning on purpose to say the same thing; and, of course, there was no point in it.”

The rest of the company laughed so immoderately over this resurrection in so remarkable a form of a fine old crusted and ivy-mantled anecdote, that Lord Taybridge felt he had scored a distinct success; in fact, for the time being, he plumed himself on being quite the funny man of the party. So—emboldened by recent triumphs—he continued, “But we have wandered from Lady Katharine’s original proposition—namely, whether life is worth living. For my part, I repeat that it is entirely—or perhaps it would be more correct to say principally”—here the speaker cast a defiant look in the direction of Mr. Wilkinson—“a question of the *digestion*: that is to say, our enjoyment of existence is wholly—or, anyway, to a great extent—a matter of health.”

"While Miss Lestrangle thinks it a matter of conscience," added Lady Jean.

"Pardon me, I said of want of conscience," retorted Sapphira. "To be good is not to be happy."

Again the tortoise bounded into the lists. "I fancy you are misquoting the proverb: I believe—though I cannot confidently affirm the fact without verifying the quotation—that the proverb really is, 'To be good is to be happy.' At least that is the impression that it has always left upon my mind."

"And which you have acted up to, Lord Taybridge," added Lady Kate.

"No, I wouldn't go so far as to say that; that I have always endeavoured to act up to it, would be perhaps a more truthful rendering."

"Silly idiot!" said Lady Kate to herself, indulging under her breath in two or three bars of Haydn's *Hymn to the Emperor*. Then she remarked aloud, "Proverbs are always misleading. For instance, could anything be more absurd than to say that 'handsome is as handsome does?'—because really it isn't in the very least."

"As a matter of fact," Lady Jean remarked, "it is the exact opposite—in short, an alternative. If you happen to be handsome, you needn't trouble to behave handsomely; while if you are not handsome, handsome behaviour is the only course open to you. The handsome woman and the plain woman play two totally different games."

Kate agreed with her. "In the game of life the handsome woman scores by honours, and the plain woman by tricks."

"That is so," added Sir Godfrey; "honours don't count in plain suits."

"The nuisance is," his wife continued, "that handsome doing takes up so much more time than handsome looking—just as curly-haired women have longer lives than straight-haired ones."

"Pray how is that?" inquired Mr. Wilkinson, whose thirst to receive information was only second to his desire to impart it; "I had no idea that curly hair was a source of longevity."

"Well, you see, it is like this," explained Lady Jean. "Kate has curly hair and I have straight hair; therefore I have to curl my hair, and she hasn't to curl hers. Now, roughly speaking, I—either personally or else vicariously through my maid—spend at least a quarter of an hour every day in curling my hair, and that tots up to close on two hours a week. Two hours a week is eight hours a month, eight hours a month is ninety-six hours a year, and ninety-six hours a year is eight working days, which is practically a week."

"What a head for figures!" murmured Sir Godfrey in mock admiration.

"Well, it's all right; I've worked it out with a pencil and paper. Now, where was I? You shouldn't have interrupted me, Godfrey."

"I apologize most humbly. You'd got to eight days being a week, which they aren't."

"Oh! that's near enough for figures. Figures never are very accurate, you know."

"Indeed, my love. I had hitherto always erroneously imagined that mathematics was the one exact science. To know and love you is, indeed, a liberal education."

"How silly you are! What I mean is that my figures are never very accurate."

"There the meeting is with you; pray proceed," replied Sir Godfrey.

"Well then, a curly-haired woman's year is at least a week longer than a straight-haired woman's year; so that, if they both live to be eighty, the curly-haired woman has had a year and eight months more time either for work or play than a straight-haired woman, and her life has been a year and eight months longer. Q. E. D."

Here Lady Kate chimed in. "But if you trust to good

behaviour instead of artificial aids to enhance your beauty and obviate your deficiencies, you'll find it a delusion and a snare. Kind hearts may be more than coronets, but they are infinitely less than curling-tongs—as aids to beauty."

"And that sort of thing is an awful waste of time," added Lady Jean. "I once kept my temper for a whole week in the hope that it would transform my very *retroussé* nose into a more regular type of feature; but I regret to inform you that it had not the slightest effect on the offending and ascending organ, while it did Godfrey no end of harm."

"How was that?" asked the inquiring Marquis. "I cannot see how harm could come to any man through his wife's keeping her temper."

"Don't you see, only one of us can be out of temper at once? That's obvious."

"But why not?"

"Because, my dear Taybridge, if I lose my temper and Godfrey loses his temper at the same time, then we haven't got a temper between us; and there must be a temper somewhere in the house, just as there must be a fire in the kitchen. So it stands to reason that when I am out of temper he must be in, and *vice versa*. Therefore it is extremely bad for him when I keep my temper, and so give him a chance of losing his."

"But I do not see—indeed I do not—the necessity for either of you to be out of temper."

Lady Jean shrugged her shoulders. "That comes of being unmarried," she said. "If you weren't so single—so absurdly single—you'd recognize the necessity at once."

"No; there again you must permit me to differ from you. If I were so fortunate as to be married, I should never be out of temper with my wife—never." And Lord Taybridge cast a meaning glance in the direction of Kate.

"Possibly not; but that wouldn't preclude the possibility of a loss of temper among the pair of you," retorted that

young lady; "a temper might be missing, even if it wasn't yours."

"As a matter of fact," continued Lord Taybridge, "I think I may say that I never—or at any rate very rarely—am out of temper. I rejoice in a most equable disposition; my mother has often remarked upon it; and has—I think with some justice—attributed it to the excellence of my health. For I consider that good temper, like the enjoyment of life, is to a great extent"—here the speaker turned with emphasis towards Mr. Wilkinson—"a question of the *digestion*."

"Temper is like wit," murmured Lady Kate; "a man may not have it himself, and yet be the cause of it in others."

"I think that here at least we have an answer to Lady Katharine's conundrum; if life is worth living depends upon whether we can keep our tempers, by which, of course, I mean whether other people can keep theirs," quoth Captain O'Flynn.

"I agree with you," cried Lady Jean; "and, further, I consider that the only two things in the world which justify a woman in losing her temper are clothes and husbands—clothes when they are new, and husbands when they are old."

"But, faith, why are old husbands more trying than young ones?" asked the gallant O'Flynn.

"I don't know; you must ask them. They've been at it longer, I suppose."

"Then why aren't old wives more trying than young ones, too, Lady Jean?"

"They are; much."

"On the contrary," remarked Mr. Wilkinson, "I should have imagined that the longer two people were married to each other, the better they would become acquainted, and the more each would know what annoyed the other."

"They do; and say it. That's what makes them so much more aggravating than the new ones. The new ones mean to be just as disagreeable; but the old ones know better how to do it."



“I agree most fully—or rather I should say to a considerable extent—with O’Flynn, that the happiness of life, and particularly of married life, depends upon whether you have a good temper,” said Lord Taybridge.

“Or rather upon whether the person you are married to has a good temper,” retorted Lady Jean; “which is really what Captain O’Flynn said. That is what makes Godfrey such a blissful creature.”

“His happy disposition, you mean?”

“No, mine.”

“Yes, Lady Jean,” Taybridge continued, “I should judge that you speak correctly when you state that you are blessed with an equable disposition; though I doubt—I very much doubt—whether this fact is not owing to a happy accident of fortune than to any special merit on your part; because, as I have already stated, I consider that good temper is to a great extent, if not entirely, a question of the——”

“Liver,” cried Lady Kate. She could not have helped it to save her life.

Lord Taybridge fairly jumped; then, regaining his composure, he added, “Of the *digestion*.”

“A good temper,” remarked Captain O’Flynn, “is a great blessing, especially when it belongs to someone else.”

Lady Jean sighed. “I began life with two huge mistakes—I could keep my temper and ride with my back to the horses; and I have been expected to do so ever since. Other happier souls can turn as red over the one and as green over the other as they choose, and then they have either their own way or the seat of honour, whichever they happen to want; but anything and anywhere will do for poor me. I know, if I live long enough, I shall ride to my own funeral with my back to the horses, as that is always my fate, worse luck! And yet I should enjoy a jolly old squabble or a drive face-forwards as much as anybody; only it is never my turn.”

"Poor child!" exclaimed her husband, with a shout of delighted laughter.

"But the hard thing is," she continued, "that Godfrey looks much better tempered than I do, while all the time I am much better tempered than Godfrey."

"I deny your premises," retorted the handsome giant.

"But, darling, even your modesty must admit that, to a casual observer, requires some elucidation. You surely cannot intend to infer you appear the more amiable of the two."

"Oh! those weren't the particular premises that I was objecting to, my love."

"But surely even your vanity can't pretend that you are really more amiable than I am?"

"That was the idea."

"Pooh! Flat burglary as ever was committed! If you think that, you'll think anything."

"I do. I think you are the most charming woman alive."

"Not at all bad for you! Thank you." And Lady Jean blew her husband a kiss across the heather.

"Now if you ask me whether life is worth living," said Captain O'Flynn, "I should say it depends on whether you are married or not; for there's never a single man or woman that I know that was really happy until they married."

Lady Kate tossed her head. "That's nonsense, Captain O'Flynn—sheer nonsense. To my mind the very expression, 'a happy marriage,' is a contradiction in terms. You might just as well talk about a square circle or a flat mountain or a sensible man."

"Nevertheless," argued Mr. Wilkinson, "even some mountains are flatter than others, and some men are more sensible than others."

"Are they? I never happened to meet them."

This, from his idol, was more than Lord Taybridge could stand. "Excuse me, Lady Katharine, but your last remark

that you have never been so fortunate as to meet a sensible man: that is manifestly impossible."

Kate's pretty mouth grew obstinate. "That is what I said."

"But, believe me, you are mistaken—egregiously mistaken. I remember that Thomas Carlyle once stated—as I thought most unjustly—that the population of the British Isles was so many millions (I regret to say that I cannot at the moment recall the exact number of millions, but it has no bearing upon the point of the story), who were mostly fools. I was so struck with the gross injustice of this remark that I made a careful calculation—founded upon personal observation—as to how many sensible men there were on an average to one fool."

"As it was from personal observation, he was never without his minimum," murmured Sapphira under her breath to Captain O'Flynn, who replied by a sympathetic smile.

"And what do you think the result of my observation was?"

"I haven't an idea; please tell me?" asked good-natured Lady Jean. "It always gives me a headache to guess conundrums, just as riding with my back to the horses ought to—and won't."

"Well, the result was that in England I found that there were five and a half sensible men to one fool, while in Scotland there were seven and three-quarters sensible men to one fool; which proved that Thomas Carlyle was utterly wrong. Very interesting, wasn't it?"

"Extremely," replied Lady Jean politely, at the same time nodding at her husband in order to induce him to suppress—or at any rate conceal—his mirth, and thereby adding to it, as wives so often do. A wifely hint—be it concealed in a nod across the table or a kick under it—nearly always precipitates the catastrophe which it was intended to avert.

"It appears to me," remarked Mr. Wilkinson in that didactic manner whereby he usually instructed the House of Commons, "that matrimony, taken as a fine art, is the one thing that makes life worth living."

“By the way,” said Lady Kate, “I wonder if matrimony is an art or a science. What is the difference?”

Mr. Wilkinson was only too pleased to instruct her. “A science is something that we know, and an art is something that we do.”

“Well, then, matrimony is neither the one nor the other,” retorted Lady Jean, “for it chiefly consists in knowing what not to do.”

“I should say that the science of matrimony is knowing better than to get married at all,” said Kate.

Sapphira shook her head. “No: the science lies in knowing whom to marry.”

“In short,” exclaimed O’Flynn, “is love worth loving depends upon the lover.”

Taybridge felt bound to interfere. “Surely *husband* is a more correct term. If love is worth loving depends upon the husband. There, dear Lady Katharine, you have the matter in a nutshell. And talking of nutshells recalls to my mind a story that makes my dear father laugh considerably whenever he tells it.”

“Let us hear it, there’s a good fellow,” said Sir Godfrey.

“Well, it was once at mess when he was with his regiment in Ireland—at least I believe it was Ireland, though I am not absolutely sure—and someone said something about something being in a nutshell—I forget what it was, but that has no bearing upon the story.”

“None at all,” agreed Sir Godfrey: “get on to what has.”

“I’m coming to that if you will only give me time, but you are such a one for hurrying a fellow.”

“And a joke is too serious a matter—like matrimony—to be taken in hand lightly or unadvisedly,” said Sir Godfrey, with a supernaturally grave face, thereby causing a perfect shower of nods from his wife’s small head.

“I wish to goodness, Godfrey, that you’d listen to me when I nod at you!” she remarked in an audible aside. “Now

that we are married, you never pay the slightest attention to any of my hints, however loud I shout : though when we were engaged you heard my softest words."

"But I never *said* they were soft, my love ; I only *thought* so."

Here Taybridge began again. "Well, as I was saying, somebody said, 'You've put the case in a nutshell, Taybridge.' (I forgot to say that this happened in my grandfather's life, so that my father was Taybridge at that time.) 'Exactly,' said one of the subalterns, a very witty chap ; 'but that's where the Captain ought to be.' Smart, wasn't it?"

"Are you sure he didn't say the Colonel?" suggested Sir Godfrey mildly.

"As far as my memory serves me, he said the Captain," replied Taybridge, decidedly nettled ; "but Captain or Colonel, whichever it was, has no bearing upon the point of the story. The point is about somebody being in a nutshell, don't you see?"

Sir Godfrey nodded his head judicially. "I'm sorry to hurt your feelings, Taybridge, but truth compels me to admit that it is a better story when you say the Colonel instead of the Captain."

But the usually amiable Marquis was still rather sulky. "I don't see that it really matters which it was, as long as it was one of the officers in the regiment ; and you make a confounded mess of a story, Hannington, when you keep fussing over unimportant details in that way—a most confounded mess!"

Sir Godfrey would have laughed outright if he had not the fear of his wife before his eyes ; but the warning grimaces of that young lady at the moment were such as no right-minded husband could defy—and live. So he was content with a modest choke.

But the free and unmarried members of the party indulged in their mirth without restraint, much to the delight of Lord

Taybridge, who, for the second time in one day, had scored an obvious conversational success. Therefore he continued, "I remember another story of the same chap—the one who said the Captain was in a nutshell, don't you know?—when they were discussing laying a request before the House of Commons for all volunteers to wear grey uniform in order to distinguish them from the regulars. At least I think it was the House of Commons; but it might have been the War Office. If it wasn't one, it must certainly have been the other; but I regret that at the moment I cannot exactly recall which it was. Still, whichever it was has no bearing upon the point of the story."

"I believe a question like that would be settled by the War Office," remarked Mr. Wilkinson.

"I do not think so: as far as my memory serves me, it was the House of Commons."

"I feel sure it must have been the War Office," persisted Mr. Wilkinson, with some heat.

"And I am just as convinced it was the House of Commons," retorted Taybridge, with equal warmth.

Then Sir Godfrey did a sinful thing, for which his wife duly scolded him afterwards: he slyly egged the combatants on to further battle. "I believe Taybridge is right, and that the House of Commons would settle a matter of that kind," he said.

"Not a bit of it," replied Mr. Wilkinson; "a thing of that kind is always referred to the permanent staff."

"Not it," responded Taybridge; "a matter such as that—which entails the spending of public money—is always decided by the House of Commons. Now you question it, I feel absolutely certain it was the House of Commons."

"And I feel equally certain it was the War Office."

By this time Sir Godfrey was in an ecstasy of delight; and was just about to add further fuel to the already blazing fire when his better-half forestalled him. "But you are forgetting

the story itself, Lord Taybridge, which we are all dying to hear. Do please tell it."

"By Jove! so I was. Well, as I was saying, my father suggested that a petition should be laid before the *House of Commons*"—here the speaker looked towards the member of that august assembly and spoke with decided emphasis—"before the *House of Commons*, I say, that the uniform of the volunteers should be grey. 'If you do,' replied the witty chap—the one that made the joke about the Captain being in the nutshell, don't you know?—'they'll only take it as scarlet.' Smart, wasn't it?"

"Killing," roared Sir Godfrey, "simply killing! And it would have been even smarter if he'd said they'd take it as read."

"Well, he didn't," replied Lord Taybridge, with some asperity. "Besides, what difference would it have made? Aren't red and scarlet the same colour?"

"Of course they are," said Lady Jean in a soothing voice, making signs of reproof to her lord and master; "scarlet is only a shade of red."

"And it is the shade that soldiers happen to wear," added Lady Kate; "while the same shade on huntsmen is called pink."

Lord Taybridge was mollified. "Exactly so; now if I'd said he said they'd take it as pink, I could have seen some sense in Hannington's objection, because soldiers' coats never are called pink."

"Of course they aren't," added kindhearted Lady Jean.

"Well, I think we ought to be getting on," said Sir Godfrey, rising from the heather as quickly as suppressed mirth would allow him; "and you'd better go home, there's a good girl, and take Lady Kate and Miss Lestrangle with you—or else you'll all be knocked up to-morrow, and not able to come out at all."

So the men went on with the day's sport, while the ladies

found their carriage and drove back to the house ; and all the time Lady Kate's heart was heavy within her.

She tried her hardest to laugh and talk with the others, but somehow she could not succeed—or if she did, she felt that she was playing a part, and that her smiling face was but a hollow mask hiding a very sad brow indeed. She could not understand what had come to her—to her, who hitherto had laughed at everything, and to whom the realities and the responsibilities of existence were alike unknown. Was it that death had passed by so near to her that she could never properly enjoy life again? Or was it that her hatred of George Despard was so deep and so bitter that it soured her character and poisoned for her the very springs of existence? She herself inclined to this latter explanation ; for he was increasingly in her thoughts, and—she argued—you must hate a man very much indeed when you begin to think about him constantly. She had not thought much about him at first. She had even gone to the length of assuring herself several times that she had completely forgotten him ; and if a woman actually remembers that she has forgotten a man—well, of course, she has.

She was growing weary of all the banter and frivolity at her aunt's ; she longed for something more solid and serious—something more in accord with her own mood. She wanted to discuss old problems and to formulate new faiths—in short, to do everything that every other young girl wants to do the first time she is confronted with reality ; and that every young girl thinks that no other girl but herself ever wanted to do since time began.

And it was just when matters had reached this crisis that Orlando Pratt came to Elnagar



## CHAPTER XV

### ORLANDO PRATT

“KATE, a new man has come.” So spake Miss Lestrangle to her cousin, who was half buried in a huge armchair before a welcome fire—the evenings were growing chilly in the north—in her room upon that same afternoon.

Kate looked up languidly.

“I’m glad of it. A new man may mean a new sensation, and I am sick to death of Taybridge with his solemn jokes, and Wilkinson with his still more solemn dogmatism. Who was it that said dogmatism was but full-grown puppyism?”

“A very sensible man, I should say,” replied Sapphira. “But are you not paying Mr. Wilkinson a compliment by suggesting that he has left the stage of puppyhood behind him?”

“You are right, Sapphira. A more egregious and self-satisfied puppy I have never met. But who is the new man?”

“A Mr. Orlando Pratt.”

“I never heard of him.”

“Nor I; but Lady Dunbar says he is an Oxford man, and reputed to be very clever. Mr. Wilkinson pronounces him to be a conceited ass. Sir Godfrey informs us that he writes poetry which nobody reads, and is so superior that he will put us all right—but that he will do it with consummate gentleness.”

Kate got up and yawned.

“Well, anyway, he will be a change from young Wilkinson,

who puts us right with consummate rudeness. Let us go and have some tea, and sample this new man. From your account of him he's just the sort of man to be in the drawing-room at tea-time. And if he isn't there, Aunt Dunbar can tell us all about him."

Lady Kate was right in her prognostication. When they reached the drawing-room they found the new arrival surrounded by an admiring bevy of enthusiastic admirers.

Mr. Orlando Pratt was a shining light of what he flattered himself was the most intellectual and advanced of Oxford colleges, and he had not a shadow of a doubt that he was the most intellectual and advanced member of its justly celebrated senior common-room. If, as all good Megatheria fondly believed, Megatherion College was the hub of the universe, he, in his own estimation, was the chief diffuser of the sweetness and light that irradiated from that magic spot. He was a tall, thin man, with somewhat scanty sandy locks, which he wore long behind. He had a white forehead, high rather than broad, a thin, hooked nose, and a large mouth with clean-shaved lips. He had thin hands with long fingers, which he was fond of waving languidly to give point to the pearls of wisdom which fell from his mouth. He had a soft voice, and when he corrected the errors of his weaker brethren, it was with an air more of pity than contempt. His whole manner bespoke one who was deeply impressed with the tragic pathos of life, of the ineffectual folly of his fellow-men, and, above all, of his own supreme superiority. Mr. Pratt could not boast of great wealth, but he had a modest competence in addition to his Fellowship. With all his apparent contempt of the world, he had a very considerable interest in creature comforts. He was a connoisseur of delicate cookery and an expert in choice vintages. If not of social distinction, he had contrived to live with the best set at Oxford, and was a welcome guest at many a country house. In his way he was no mean celebrity, and men of high social position were not averse from claiming his acquaintance.

"I am glad you have arrived upon the scene, Kate," said Lady Jean, after her mother had duly introduced the new arrival to the two girls, "as we are continuing the argument we began at luncheon."

"What a feeble thing to do!" cried Kate. "It reminds one of naughty children who are made to eat up at tea-time whatever they have refused to eat at dinner."

"But you are under a misapprehension, Lady Katharine," explained Lord Taybridge; "it is not the actual luncheon we are continuing, but the conversation at luncheon."

"Oh, I grasped as much! Your intellectual fare at present consists of political rissoles *à la* Wilkinson, and hashed anecdotes served with Taybridge sauce." Kate was decidedly impatient, and as she stood by the huge wood fire, warming one small foot, she looked like some restive young warhorse scenting the battle from afar. "And I repeat that I think it very feeble of you all to hash up and continue your conversation in this way—just as if it were a piece of Sunday beef or a serial story in a daily paper."

"Permit me to differ from you, Lady Katharine," said Orlando Pratt in a gentle drawl.

Kate turned her head with a start; to differ from her was exactly what she did not permit. But it required a cleverer woman than Lady Katharine Clare to frighten Mr. Pratt. So he slowly continued: "There is nothing so wearisome as novelty! It is difficult to say which are the most fatiguing—new ideas, new religions, or new boots."

"For my part I adore new things," retorted Kate. "I make a point of always curtseying to the new moon."

"So do I—because there is nothing new about it; it is only the old moon cleaned and retrimmed, without even being turned."

"Well, anyway, I pretend that it is new, or else I should not curtsey to it," persisted Kate.

Pratt looked lazily at her through his half-closed eyelids.

"Naturally, Lady Katharine; but that is because you are young."

Now if there is one thing that enrages a woman more than being told she is old, it is being told that she is young—given, of course, that there is some foundation for either assertion.

"I don't see what my age—or want of age—has to do with it."

"It has everything to do with it. The young adore what is young; the old adore what is old. We all make gods in our own image, and then fall down and worship them.

"Oh, how very interesting!" exclaimed Lady Jean, who did not think it interesting in the least. Kate, on the contrary, thought it interesting, but did not say so.

"In the same way," Pratt continued, "the people whom we most admire are *éditions de luxe* of ourselves."

"I always understood, Pratt, that it was your rule to admire nobody," put in Wilkinson.

"Precisely," remarked Mr. Pratt calmly. "I have myself never met such a person as I described."

"But I thought it was an axiom," argued Kate, "that people invariably fall in love with their opposites?"

"It is an axiom, and therefore wrong. An axiom—like a proverb—is an elevating lie which conceals as far as possible a degrading truth."

"That is just what we were saying at lunch, Mr. Pratt, if Kate will excuse my referring to it," exclaimed Lady Jean; "only we did not put it quite so neatly."

Orlando waved his hand in a graceful, if somewhat affected manner. "I am only too happy, ladies, if I have succeeded in embodying some of your recent inspirations. And I think if you will go deeper into the subject, you will see that we are right. In fact I go so far as to affirm that there is no proverb extant which does not endeavour to teach us what we know to be untrue."

"There I totally disagree with you," said Mr. Wilkinson;

“a proverb is proverbially the wisdom of many embodied in the wit of one.”

“I should rather describe it as the wisdom of many refuted by the wit of one,” Orlando replied. “For instance, we are taught by a proverb that ‘Two blacks won’t make a white,’ while we all know that they will. A precedent justifies almost any action; and it is only the deeper blackness of our friends that satisfactorily whitewashes ourselves. The more we are accustomed to a crime, the less we are shocked at it. One black is black, I admit; but a large quantity of blacks all together become almost dazzling in their whiteness.”

Wilkinson was again about to interrupt him, but Pratt did not give him an opening; he had not travelled all the way to Scotland to hear another man talk, or to let anybody else do so. So he calmly continued—

“Countless instances only serve to show further how right we are. What is ‘Take care of the pence, and the pounds will take care of themselves,’ but an obviously artificial herring drawn across the trail of the commercial truth that only by great speculations are great fortunes amassed—that reckless speculation—or peculation—is the only royal road to success? What is ‘Blood is thicker than water’ but a feeble contradiction of the universal fact that there are no people so consummately irritating as one’s own relations?”

But this was more than Lord Taybridge could stand. “Oh, I say, that is all rot! I am sure that blood is thicker than water; my mother says it is.”

“Hers may be,” replied the imperturbable Pratt; “mine is not.”

“Nevertheless,” remarked Lady Dunbar, “proverbs must be more or less true.”

“On what compulsion must they?” Sapphira asked.

“Oh! because they are always supposed to be.”

“My dear madam,” said Orlando, “proverbs are nothing but moral blank cartridges, wherewith the young idea is charged,

in order to prevent its shooting in the preserves of its elders. We are taught in our youth not to play with fire; and we learn as we grow older that it is the only really satisfactory plaything in the world. If nobody had ever played with fire, the steam-engine would never have been invented; not to mention sundry other interesting experiences which we should have missed entirely. We are taught in our youth that it is love which makes the world go round; while as a matter of fact, the spirit of competition—accentuated by the hatred which competition necessarily engenders—is the propelling force. Believe me, a world moved entirely by love would progress at the same speed as Joshua's moon in Ajalon, or as the South Eastern. Yes; proverbs are intended for external application only; we are never expected to believe them ourselves."

But Marchionesses are not silenced so easily as all that. "They are nothing of the kind, Mr. Pratt. Now what could be truer than to say, 'Nobody knows where the shoe pinches as well as he who wears it'?"

"That true, dear lady? It is utterly and abominably false. As a matter of fact, the wearer of the shoe is the only person who does *not* know where it pinches. If the wearer of the shoe knew where it pinched as well as do the onlookers, two-thirds of the married men of my acquaintance would have been hanged for wife-murder."

Lady Dunbar looked shocked. "Oh, Mr. Pratt, what a peculiar thing to say!"

"Truth always sounds peculiar, my dear madam, we are so unaccustomed to it. The ignorance of most wearers of the matrimonial shoe is to my mind one of the world's greatest miracles. Know where it pinches? On the contrary, it is usually where it pinches most that they particularly pique themselves upon its fit. We onlookers wonder that with such a shoe they can bear to walk the earth at all; we should consider amputation of the entire foot a lesser evil. But as for

them, they are running and leaping like young harts upon the mountains, and are as unconscious of our sympathy as of their need of it."

Lady Dunbar still looked shocked, but her niece laughed. Kate could not help listening to the man in spite of herself.

"I see, Mr. Pratt, that you disapprove of marriage as much as I do," she said.

But Orlando demurred. "On the contrary, Lady Katharine, I very much approve of it, when it is suitably and artistically carried out. But how like a woman to argue that because I object to a pinching shoe I should therefore choose to go barefoot! Believe me, there are such things as shoes that fit—there is such a thing as marriage without repentance."

"I very much doubt it," cried Kate, with her customary toss of the head.

"According to my cousin," said Sapphira, "marriage is the grave of love."

"Precisely," added Orlando; "and therefore the gate into love's paradise."

Again Kate could not help admiring the man's neatness of phrase.

"There is a proverb," Orlando continued, "that is responsible for the unhappiness of many marriages."

"And what is that?" asked Mr. Wilkinson.

"'What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander'—a most misleading platitude, and one which gives women quite erroneous notions. The two birds are totally different; and what is suitable seasoning for the one would prove a highly inappropriate condiment with the other."

"Then what *is* the proper sauce for the goose, Mr. Pratt?" Kate asked.

"Apple sauce—which she prepared for herself in Eden some six thousand years ago. There is a certain acidity—not to say bitterness—about it, I admit; but it has its compensating sweetness. The gander, however, is a tougher bird, and

requires something decidedly stronger and more piquant. When a woman has once learnt that what is sauce for herself is not sauce for her husband, and never will be, and that she had better not inquire what is, she has passed the Little-go of matrimonial education."

"I conclude," remarked Mr. Wilkinson, "that 'Marry in haste and repent at leisure' is another of the proverbs to which you take exception."

"Most decidedly. The repentance depends upon *whom* you marry—not upon *when*."

"But," Mr. Wilkinson argued, "the longer you are making up your mind, the less likely you are to make a mistake."

"Not a bit of it, my dear fellow. Love has its origin not in knowledge of other people's virtues, but in ignorance of their faults."

"Then the longer you know them, the more likely you will be to discover their faults." And Mr. Wilkinson glared triumphantly at his adversary.

"Certainly not. The only faults that really make you dislike people are the faults that strike you at once, such as the sound of their voices and the shape of their hands and the way in which they move. We pity people for bad morals; it is only for bad manners that we hate them."

"Then do you mean to say," asked Kate, "that if we don't see a person's faults at once, we shall never see them?"

"Certainly; and if we do see them at once we shall see them always. Therefore nothing but love at first sight is a sure foundation for married happiness; a union based upon mutual esteem is begun in wisdom and consequently bound to close in tears. All the great mistakes in life have their root in caution; second thoughts are invariably misleading."

"I think the great secret of a happy marriage is to marry young—while the character is to a great extent unformed, and therefore adaptable." Lady Dunbar was speaking for her niece's benefit.



But Orlando speedily pushed aside arguments with a wave of his hand. "Not a bit of it, my dear madam, not a bit of it. That is another piece of the false coinage of platitude which is supposed to pass as current coin of the realm. Youth is the least adaptable period of our lives, just as it is the most serious."

"But, my dear fellow, that is nonsense—sheer nonsense; youth is, and must be, the gayest and least serious time of life," cried Mr. Wilkinson.

"Nevertheless it is not; nothing is so grave and solemn and overwhelmed with responsibility as youth—nothing is so devoid of humour. The skies of April are not sterner nor the winds of May more harsh than the opinions and judgments of the very young. If you wish to impress the young, you must treat life as a serious matter; if you wish to comfort the old, you must treat death as a trifling one. The old are charmed by laughter and the young by tears."

"Well, then," asked Lord Taybridge in his most ponderous and convincing manner, "I should like to know what parents mean when you come of age and they tell you you must begin to take life seriously, and all that sort of thing, don't you know?"

Mr. Pratt sank languidly back in his chair with a sigh. "My dear fellow, why ask *me* what parents mean? I haven't a notion myself, and I very much doubt whether they have."

"Then how can they do you any good when they say things to you?" persisted Taybridge.

"They don't. Improving conversation is like saccharine—it doesn't do you any good; but, unlike sugar and some other conversation, it doesn't do you any harm. That is all that can be said for it."

"Don't you approve of early marriages, then, Mr. Pratt?" asked Lady Jean.

"Not as a rule."

"Why not?"

"Because the basis of married happiness is a common ground of humour. The great thing in choosing a husband or a wife is to choose someone who laughs at the same things that we ourselves laugh at. That is all that really matters. If we only take care of the smiles, the tears will take care of themselves. And the sense of humour is undeveloped in the very young. You cannot tell before you are five-and-twenty what are the precise things that you are going to spend the rest of your life in laughing at."

"It certainly does not answer," remarked Sapphira, "for a woman with a sense of humour to marry a man without one."

"But, my dear lady, there is no such thing as a person without a sense of humour. Different people have different-shaped senses of humour, but all have the sense in some sort. Supposing, however, that mine is square and yours is lozenge-shaped, mine will include things which yours does not include, and *vice versa*; and in choosing a life-partner it is well to select one whose sense of humour is the same shape as one's own, otherwise life's laughter will be in canon instead of in unison."

"But how can you tell whether another person's humour is the same shape as yours?" Kate asked.

"Easily enough. I have one or two test-jokes with which I try people at once. If their lips smile and not their eyes, I have nothing more to do with them. If their eyes smile and not their lips, we are friends for life."

"I call that a capital idea," exclaimed Lord Taybridge. "I've a very strong sense of humour myself, and I should not care to marry a girl who did not know a joke when she saw one."

"Of course you would not," Pratt replied. "I would therefore advise you to compose a list of test-jokes so as to prepare the candidate for matrimony, and see if she is eligible for a nomination."

"Now, there's a very funny tale the Duke tells (I may men-

tion in passing that it is from him that I inherit my strong sense of humour), and I should say if a girl didn't see the joke of that she'd never see anything."

"Tell it, there's a good fellow!" said Sir Godfrey, looking up from the book he was reading, and for the first time joining in the conversation.

"Well, there was once an awfully funny fellow called Sidney Smith, or Jones, or something of that kind, and the London County Council were talking about putting a wooden pavement all round St. Paul's Cathedral, or round Westminster Abbey—I forget exactly which it was at the present moment, but whichever it was has no bearing upon the point of the story."

Here Mr. Wilkinson—in his usual quest for unsullied truth—interrupted the speaker. "It could not possibly have been the London County Council. There was no such body in Sidney Smith's time."

"But I am sure it was."

"And I am absolutely certain it couldn't have been."

"Are *you* telling the tale or am *I*?" asked Lord Taybridge, it must be admitted with some dignity.

"*You* are, old fellow, so push on with the joke," cried Sir Godfrey, who by this time had laid down his book altogether, and was thoroughly enjoying himself.

"I shall get to it in time if you won't hurry me so. Well, as I was saying, the *County Council*"—this with one of his lordship's usual glances in the direction of Mr. Wilkinson—"were discussing whether or not to have a wood pavement laid down round either St. Paul's Cathedral or Westminster Abbey—I can't at the moment recall which."

"But whichever it was has no bearing upon the point of the story," quoted Kate pertly.

"Precisely so. Well, then, this Smith, or Jones, or whatever his name was—I forget exactly what was his name, but I know he was a very witty person—said the *County Council*" (here

another triumphant glance at Mr. Wilkinson) "had but to consider the question, and there was the wood pavement. Smart, wasn't it?"

"Exquisitely so," murmured Pratt, as soon as he could speak for laughing, the rest of the party being equally convulsed with mirth.

"I knew you'd think it a good story," said Taybridge, with considerable complacency. "Now if a girl couldn't see the joke of that, I should say she had no sense of humour."

Kate certainly passed the test so far, for she was positively wiping her eyes in her excess of laughter.

"And yet," remarked Sir Godfrey, "there are people who in telling that story would alter it into 'they had only to put their heads together, and there was the wood pavement.' I've heard the tale told that way myself."

"Well, it wouldn't have been any funnier, would it?" asked the successful raconteur.

"Certainly not, nor half so funny," replied Hannington; while Kate went off into fresh peals of merriment.

"I can generally see a joke myself," continued Taybridge, "if only I have time. If you don't see it just at first, it is a great help to write it down—just as my mother does when she doesn't know how to spell a word. You nearly always can see it then."

But it was high time for Orlando once more to take the stage: he felt he had waited in the slips quite long enough. "Again, people will inform you—I mean really good, improving people, who never tell you the truth for fear it should do you harm—that the basis of married happiness is unity in the great objects of life. Nothing of the kind. Married people can differ as much as they like about the main issues of existence, as long as they agree about its amusements. It won't in the least matter having two religions or two politics in a home if you have only one game. If a husband and wife agree that golf—or bridge—is the only game worth playing, they will never quarrel over Tariff Reform or Apostolic Succession."

"Nevertheless, Mr. Pratt, I still hold that people should marry when they are young and adaptable." Lady Dunbar again spoke with a view to her niece's spiritual welfare.

"Oh! no, no, dear lady. Youth is so infallible; and infallibility is the one unpardonable sin in married life. When you are young, you always know you are right: when you grow older you know that hardly anybody is right, and certainly not yourself; which state of mind conduces considerably to conjugal happiness."

"I do not agree with you at all."

"But, Lady Dunbar, you *must* agree with me, if only you will give the matter your serious attention. Think how exceptional youth is—how it believes that nobody ever thought as it thinks, or felt as it feels: and it is so terribly commonplace nowadays to be exceptional, and so exceptional to be commonplace. And think of being married to a creature who regarded itself as unique! It would bore one to death."

"You wouldn't like to marry an exception, would you, Mr. Pratt?" asked Lady Jean.

"If I did, she would never prove her rule."

"But you surely can't mean that you would like to be commonplace yourself," exclaimed Kate in an expostulating voice.

"I should revel in it, it would be so distinguished. But alas! it is impossible."

Here Lady Dunbar met Mr. Pratt half-way. "It certainly is a mistake for a girl to get a reputation for being exceptional: I agree with you so far. It always hinders her from marrying well."

"My dear lady, it is a mistake for anyone to get a reputation for anything. If you do, you will never be allowed to do or be anything else as long as you live."

Here Mr. Wilkinson interposed his usual apt quotation. "Give a dog a bad name, and hang him."

Orlando positively shuddered. "No, no, no; not a bit of it! Give a dog a good name, and hang him, would be nearer the mark. It is a reputation for virtue that is socially so damning."

"Oh, Mr. Pratt, what a thing to say!" Again the Marchioness looked shocked.

Orlando shrugged his shoulders. "Truth—like murder—will out, and—also like murder—is generally unpleasant. Let me multiply instances. What could be more damaging to a man than a reputation for unselfishness? Every woman with whom he dances will imagine it is because she is plain: every woman to whom he talks will believe it is because she is stupid."

"I like unselfish men," said Kate, suddenly seized with a spirit of contradiction.

"That, Lady Katharine, is because you don't know any; no really unselfish man would ever speak to you. Again, what could be more disastrous to a woman than a reputation for good temper? Her male friends will neglect her for those whom they love less and fear more, and her female friends will borrow her best sunshade."

"But her male friends will want to marry her," replied Lady Dunbar.

"That is so, and will bully her for the rest of their lives."

Sir Godfrey laughed. "Will they, Pratt? Wait till you've married a good-tempered woman."

"It is time to go and dress," said the Marchioness, rising from her seat, and thinking that Mr. Pratt's influence was not exactly the one most suited to her already too turbulent niece. Lady Kate was quite self-willed and cantankerous enough without needing this man's unconventional views to make her more so; and the Master of Killeven was arriving next day—one of the most eligible suitors that Lady Dunbar had provided for this most super-dainty of Kates. It would never do for Mr. Pratt to draw away Lady Katharine's

attention from so admirable a young man as the Master of Killeven.

But the fact that her aunt deprecated this new and baneful influence, in no way prevented Lady Kate from succumbing to it. During the next few days she and Orlando became great friends. Kate was young enough to be impressed by Pratt's affected cynicism, and clever enough to appreciate his undoubted ability. Having met him in the nick of time when she was feeling out of tune with the easy frivolity of the rest of the party, she believed he was much more in earnest than he was, or than he even pretended to be. To her he seemed an embittered and disappointed man of the world, who had eaten whole apple-pies of Sodom and found them dissolve into dust-bins; and in her present frame of mind that was exactly the kind of thing to fascinate her. Orlando, too, was wise enough not to make love to her just then, but to convey to her, in a subtle way, the impression that he regarded her as an intellectual comrade rather than a possible wife; and there is nothing more flattering to the female mind than to be treated as the one thing that it is not. Foolish men praise women for the charms which they undoubtedly possess; wise men for those in which they are conspicuously lacking. In fact there is only one thing which delights a woman more than to be commended for an excellence to which she could not possibly attain, and that is to be scolded for a fault of which she could not possibly be guilty. These form the two surest and strongest weapons of flattery in man's armoury, and they rarely, if ever, fail.

## CHAPTER XVI

### KATE REBELS

LORD and Lady Claverley were seated at breakfast. The post-bag had just been brought in, and the Earl set to work to divide its contents between himself and his wife, before proceeding to discuss his letters and his muffins.

“Two letters for you, my love, from Elnagar. One from Kate and the other from Augusta Dunbar.” And the Earl having handed them over to his wife, began to turn over his own pile, examining the outside of each very carefully in order to discover whether their contents were likely to be of a pleasing nature or the reverse. Apparently those of an unpleasing nature predominated; and, indeed, the envelopes most suspiciously suggested bills, for the Earl’s countenance lost its benign aspect, and assumed a distinctly discontented, not to say irate, character. Nor did the contents seem to be of a more soothing nature than was promised by the outward show.

“I could wish, my love,” began the Earl, not without irritability, “that Charles might be made to understand the extent of his breakages. Nothing seems to put an effective check upon his destructive energy. Here is a bill for glass and china which——” But the Earl’s powers were unequal to the task of expressing the woeful feelings excited by Messrs. Mortlock’s account. He simply raised his hands despairingly.

During this speech the culprit had entered the room with a dish of bacon and eggs, and had heard my lord’s diatribe



with the complacent composure wherewith a rhinoceros might receive a dig in the ribs from a toasting-fork.

But Lady Claverley was deep in her own correspondence, and Charles escaped from the room; it was not so much a flight as a strategic movement to the rear, carried out with slow dignity.

"Kate will be back on Friday," remarked Lady Claverley.

"So far as my observation goes, Charles becomes more helpless with his hands every day."

"She will come by the London and North Western as far as Birmingham."

"And he has no proper feeling in the matter. After a most reprehensible disaster, only yesterday I observed him smiling, positively smiling."

"I trust that Tiffany will see that she has a footwarmer, and will not forget the rugs. Kate is so thoughtless. I think perhaps I had better send a telegram to remind her."

The Earl groaned in spirit. How could a nobleman discharge the duties of his high estate, if the wife of his bosom insisted on talking of footwarmers when the delinquencies of a footman were so urgent?

"I could wish, Henrietta, that you would pay some slight attention when I am trying to discuss a serious domestic matter with you."

The Countess, who was now opening her sister-in-law's letter, caught the vexed tone in her husband's voice.

"I'm very sorry, Claverley, but I was so busy reading Kate's letter. What is it?"

The Earl proceeded to repeat his tale of woe.

"Yes, Claverley, it is as you say, very distressing. Charles should not be so careless. I will speak to him. Leave it to me, and don't for worlds say anything to him yourself: it is always a mistake when the master of a house interferes in its arrangements. Brown says we shall never get another footman without the greatest difficulty."

And the Countess returned to her letter, which apparently afforded her as little gratification as Mortlock's bill had possessed for the Earl. There was a short silence, which was broken by the Countess.

"I am afraid, Claverley, this visit to Elnagar has not been a success."

"Is that so, my love, is that so?"

The Earl made a gallant attempt to appear unconcerned; but the most casual observer might have discovered more than a trace of perturbation in his countenance.

"Augusta writes that the visit has been a failure, so far as its main object is concerned. She says that Kate has had three most excellent offers, but she has refused them all."

The Earl groaned. Most excellent offers! Refused them all! What folly, what madness, when so much depended upon her marriage! In his distress a shred and tatter of a long-forgotten quotation came to his lips.

"*Quos Deus vult perdere,*" he began lugubriously, but he was not allowed to finish the ancient tag.

"It's all very well to talk Latin, Claverley," interrupted his wife, with an acerbity wherewith she was not often afflicted, "but it won't do an atom of good. In fact Latin never does do anybody any good, except when it's in the form of a prescription. What can the child be thinking of? She must really have lost her senses."

"That, my love," suggested the Earl mildly, "is the very thought that occurred to me, and which is crystallized by the wisdom of the ancients in the quotation you did not permit me to complete."

"I'm sorry, Claverley; but I confess I am a little put out. Such an exceptional young man, too—and so well brought up. I should have thought she might have been satisfied with the Master of Killeven——"

"A most worthy young man! His father was my fag at Eton."

“Yes, Claverley, but that doesn’t help matters in the least. If his father obeyed you, your own daughter won’t; and that is the difficulty just now. Then there’s young Wilkinson, who, though a commoner and quite a young man, is still a celebrity. He made a sensation, if I remember, last session by a speech—I forget what it was about—Hottentots, or County Councils, or sanitary reform, or something of that kind. They say he will be Prime Minister some day.”

“Prime Minister, indeed!” quoth the Earl, with some heat. “A conceited puppy, who thinks rudeness is wit, and at six-and-twenty poses as a compendium of human wisdom and political sagacity. But as you say, my love, a worthy young man, and an excellent match for Kate; and the fact that he would make a poor Prime Minister will in no way prevent him from making a good husband, the offices being entirely different in character.”

“Well, I could, perhaps, pardon her for not taking either of them, though in either case the connection would have been most suitable. But what can one say when she rejects the Marquis of Taybridge?”

“Taybridge?” cried the Earl, falling back in his chair; “you don’t mean to say, my love, that Taybridge has proposed to her and been refused?”

“But I do mean to say it; at least, so Augusta reports. She says that he is neither good-looking nor clever, but as steady as a rock—a pattern eldest son, in fact, who would become an ideal husband. I don’t approve of good-looking husbands; at least, I shouldn’t have liked one myself. Other women spoil them so.”

“And what excuse—what possible reason—can Kate offer for rejecting so suitable a young man?” cried the Earl in despair.

The Countess shrugged her shoulders. “She seems to have flirted with him most outrageously, Augusta says—but when it came to the point, she said it was like his impertinence

to suppose that she would give up the title of Countess of Claverley, even to wear the brand-new strawberry leaves of the dukedom of Deeside."

"And a very proper remark, too," quoth the Earl, forgetting the urgency of the case in his pride of race and title; "Kate is my own daughter—my own daughter. A most unwarranted proposal on the part of Taybridge—most unwarranted." And the Earl arose and strode about the room.

"Most unwarranted, I say. I am surprised at Taybridge ever making the suggestion. I always regarded him as a man having the soundest views on matters of propriety."

"True, my love; and I can to some degree sympathize with you. But it doesn't help matters—and here is Kate coming home, by the 5-15 on Friday, and no more married—I mean, no more in love—than I am."

"True, my love. I was forgetting that," cried the Earl dolorously. "Yes—and two months are gone—wasted, positively wasted. Henrietta, I can bear this strain no longer. It is too much for me."

The Earl sank into his chair and covered his face with his hands. Then the outraged feelings of the mother were replaced by the solicitous anxiety of the wife. The Countess left her place and came to comfort the Earl.

"Come, Claverley; you must not give way like this, or you will make yourself quite poorly. In fact as it is, I think you'd better take a digestive tablet immediately after breakfast, or else it is sure to disagree with you. I always very much object to thinking about annoying things during meals; it ruins the strongest digestion. Don't worry any more, my love; and when Kate arrives, I will talk to her. I daresay Taybridge will propose again, and I will persuade Kate to accept him."

But her husband was not to be comforted. The horns of the dilemma were too sharp; in the one case the prospect of saving the Castle became remote, in the other the salvation of

the Castle involved the loss of the ancient title. Wherefore the Earl refused the consolation offered by his wife in the hope of Kate's reconsidering her rejection of the heir to the dukedom of Deeside. The Countess, most admirable of wives, did her best; but finding direct efforts of no avail, wisely tried the effect of changing the subject. She took up an unopened letter from the table.

"Here is a letter you have omitted to look at, Claverley; I wonder what it is about?"

"Another bill, I presume," sighed the Earl.

"I don't think it is a bill—though the envelope is the same shape as a bill-envelope, and the handwriting is very neat and common and shoppy. It is stamped *Paddington*, and is sealed with some kind of a crest."

"Give it me, my love," said the Earl, "and I will try and satisfy your very natural curiosity. It seems a simple matter; yet few are able to grasp the fact that the shortest way of discovering the writer of a letter is, frequently, the operation of breaking the seal."

Lord Claverley proceeded to put his theory into practice with leisurely dignity.

"Ebenezer Pettigrew," he murmured, as he studied the signature. "Ebenezer Pettigrew—Phœbus, what a name!"

"I thought you said Ebenezer, Claverley, not Phœbus."

"I was quoting, my love, I was quoting. Now where have I seen this name before? It seems to strike a responsive echo in some chord of memory."

"Pettigrew—Pettigrew," repeated the Countess; "yes, the name seems familiar. Why, Claverley, surely that is the name of Katharine MacBalloch's next of kin—the person who is to inherit Kate's property after she hasn't got married, if she doesn't."

"My love, you are right, you are right," exclaimed the Earl eagerly; "at least you are wrong, for he is Sandy MacBalloch's next of kin, not Katharine's."

“You know what I mean,” said the Countess a little impatiently; “anyway, that is the man. What has he to say?”

The Earl adjusted his eyeglasses and slowly perused the letter.

“Most extraordinary,” he muttered, as he read, “a very remarkable epistle! My love,” turning to his wife, “I think this letter will astonish you not a little.”

“Very possibly, Claverley; but I do not see how I am to be astonished, if you keep it entirely to yourself.”

“True, my love, your remark is very just. Here is the letter. I should be greatly indebted to you if you would read it to me. I am not very certain that I have altogether grasped the man’s meaning.”

The Countess took the letter from her lord and master and read as follows:—

“MY LORD,—

“Although personally unknown to your lordship, I venture to address you on a matter of great importance and much interest to us both. When I inform you that I am next of kin to the late Alexander MacBalloch, you will readily conceive that I refer to the Will of Katharine MacBalloch, lately deceased. The terms of this most unjust Will are doubtlessly familiar to you, and I will not weary you by recapitulating them.

“It is unnecessary to remark that I have no mercenary motive in the judgment I have formed of this Will; but my sense of justice is revolted—and I do not doubt that you will agree with me—by the exclusion of my son and daughter from the inheritance they have naturally been led to expect—a partial exclusion should your daughter not fulfil the condition of marrying within six months; but as this is an unlikely event, we may say that, humanly speaking, the exclusion is absolute.

“In these circumstances, my lord, I have anticipated receiving a proposal from you to make up to my disinherited

children in some way for the frustration of their long-cherished and most natural expectations. But days and weeks have rolled on, and no such communication has reached me; so that I am reluctantly compelled to conclude that your lordship has not seen the matter in the right light. It is, therefore, incumbent upon me to point out to your lordship the proper, the only course.

“In such a matter it is of little use to beat about the bush. The question can be placed in a nutshell. It is requisite for your daughter to marry in order to secure the advantage of the Will. My son is unmarried. The situation is providential. When Katharine MacBalloch signed this document, she little imagined how her iniquitous intentions would be ultimately overruled by good. She was, I fear, a worldly woman; I lament, though I cannot doubt, her fate. But I am digressing. My proposal shortly is this: let your daughter marry my son. In this way the two houses will mutually profit by the Will; and the young man Despard, to whose malign influence I attribute in a great measure the terms of this document, will be finally prevented from enjoying the fruits of his iniquity.

“My lord, I do not make this a request; I demand it as a right. And I feel sure that your well-known justice will recognize the equity of the course I suggest.

“Anticipating an early and favourable answer,

“I remain, my lord,

“Your lordship’s obedient servant,

“EBENEZER PETTIGREW.”

“Well,” cried the Countess, as she laid down the epistle on the breakfast-table, “of all the barefaced and impudent proposals ever made, I think, Claverley, this is the most barefaced and impudent!”

“I am disposed to agree with you, my love; most impertinent, most impertinent! A Pettigrew to propose to marry my daughter—a Pettigrew!” And the Earl took a pinch of

snuff to enable him to bear up under the egregious insult to the dignity of the Clares.

"Well, you will remember, Claverley, that I told you, when you were insisting on Kate's marrying money, that I *knew* her husband would have some horrid name like Tompkins."

"Tompkins, my love, is quite a different matter; I have known a very respectable man named Tompkins. But Pettigrew! bah!" It is impossible to describe the contempt and aversion the Earl contrived to put into the monosyllable.

"They had no right to entertain expectations, had they?" asked the Countess.

"Not the slightest. The estate was left entirely to Katharine MacBalloch to dispose of as she would. And, so far as I remember, these Pettigrews were the most distant connections of her husband. He had never even seen them."

"How shall you reply?"

"I shall not reply in a hurry, my love. I shall give the matter mature consideration. I am by no means clear whether it would not be more dignified to treat the letter with silent contempt."

"Well," sighed the Countess, "I must go and tell Brown to get Kate's room ready."

In due course Lady Kate arrived at home, and confirmed in substance, if not in detail, all that the Marchioness of Dunbar had reported concerning her misdeeds. Kate had reached the defiant stage; she was at war with herself and with all mankind. Why, she asked herself, could she not have been left alone? Why had the old days of careless ease and light-hearted cheerfulness gone for ever? That they had irrevocably departed, she had no manner of doubt; and she had a strong feeling of resentment towards those who consciously or unconsciously were responsible: towards her god-mother, whose death had invested life with new and deeper meanings for her, and whose Will had imposed upon her the duty of choice—and of choice, too, in a matter where decision



was doubtful, and where an error was irremediable; and towards the secretary, with whose heart she had trifled, and who had dared to show her to herself as she was. She was ashamed of the part she had played; but, sobered as she had been for the time, she now, as so frequently happens, was carried to the opposite extreme. What had been, was, and could not be altered. What would be, would; it was not her fault. She had not ordered her life, and she was not responsible for the future. A very reckless Kate it was who came home. Wherefore, when questioned by her mother, she confessed her misdeeds at once; and to the sorrow of the Countess showed no signs of repentance or remorse—to say nothing of amendment of life. Yes, the master of Killeven had proposed, and she had refused him. She supposed she had flirted with him. If he thought she meant more than she did, that was his fault; men must look out for themselves.

“But, my love, that is not at all a proper sentiment.”

“Isn't it, mother? I'm sorry. I daresay I should have had him, but he began to bore me with a vegetarian craze.”

“How very shocking! Your poor dear grandmamma never could put up with fancy religions—neither can I. And it is so absurd to be a vegetarian, because it stands to reason that if we'd been meant to be vegetarians, beef and mutton would never have been created. And, besides, we are expressly told how severely Saint Paul—or was it Saint Peter?—was blamed for declining to take meat when it was offered to him, which proves that vegetarianism is quite sinful as well as ruinous to the digestion and most provocative of anæmia. Is the young man a vegetarian himself?”

“I don't think he is yet. But he began to quote tracts to prove that vegetarianism was a perfect cure for all the ills that mortal flesh is heir to, even for original sin, and wanted to know if I didn't agree with him.”

“And what did you reply?”

“Oh! I said that the first experiment in the Garden of

Eden didn't prove altogether satisfactory; in short, that it seemed as if vegetarianism was the cause of rather than the cure for original sin. Then he got huffy, and said I shouldn't treat serious matters with levity. So I said I didn't see much levity in my treatment of him, and he was a serious enough subject in all conscience. And there was an end of *him*."

"And how about Mr. Wilkinson?"

"Oh! he was depressingly political; but, all the same, he was rather fun, his conceit was so colossal. He told me that I was the only woman who could make him happy, and he seemed to have his doubts about me. When I asked him why, he replied that no commonplace woman could appreciate him. So I replied that certainly it required a woman of imagination to see his good points. Then he too got huffy. But I found he was assuming among his friends that we were engaged, so I told him that being a politician he should remember that even an Appropriation Bill requires the royal assent before it becomes an Act. And that was the end of *him*."

The Countess sighed.

"It's no use my speaking of Lord Taybridge. Your aunt Augusta has told me about him; and I admit that, anxious as your father is for you to be married, he would bitterly regret for the old title to be merged in a modern one—even in a dukedom."

"Well, I'm not going to do it—so papa needn't be at all anxious."

"But, Kate, my love, what is to be done? There's not much more than three months left in which to select all the trousseau as well as the bridegroom. You promised when you went to Elnagar you would try to like someone."

"Oh, mother dear, I did try. I really meant it. But I cannot, I cannot, I cannot."

And Kate hid her face in her mother's bosom, and burst into a passionate fit of weeping. Lady Claverley did her best

to comfort her daughter, soothing her and promising her that she should not be forced into an unwelcome marriage.

But when Lady Claverley came to talk over matters with her lord, the awkwardness of the situation became apparent. It was all very well for her, in her motherly desire to console her wayward and unhappy child, to declare that she should be left free to do as she wished; but if her wishes lay in the direction of spinsterhood, even a spinsterhood strictly limited in its duration, the result would be the loss of Kate's fortune, and all chance of extricating the Claverley estates from financial disaster. This was a point on which Lord Claverley felt very strongly, and he expressed his feelings with some emphasis to the wife of his bosom.

"The long and short of it is, Henrietta, if Kate flatly refuses to marry, ruin and ruin only stares us in the face—ruin, ruin."

The Countess acknowledged in her heart that the Earl had some ground for dissatisfaction with his daughter; but a mother always sticks up for her children against the head of the family, at any rate in their absence. Besides, she had no doubt in her own mind that Kate would succumb in the end, and do all that was required of her.

"It will be inconvenient, Claverley, I admit; but ruin is too strong a word to use."

"It is not a whit too strong, my love. I repeat it, ruin stares us in the face. And my undutiful child will bring sorrow upon her father's grey hairs."

It did not occur to the Earl that his own extravagance and his reckless speculations had had a good deal more to do with his embarrassments than his daughter's wilfulness; but it did not escape the notice of the Countess, though she was too good a wife to give full expression to her thoughts. But she was not going to let her husband escape altogether.

"I don't think you are doing Kate justice. She is a little headstrong and romantic. But she has to thank *you* for the

romantic ideas : poor dear mamma never allowed *me* to fill my head with poetry and nonsense. And it is too bad to call her undutiful. It really is, Claverley."

The Earl collapsed at once.

"Perhaps, my love, I used too strong an expression in calling her undutiful. But you will admit," he added pathetically, "that there are extenuating circumstances. To think that I should have to let the Castle; to think that my wife should have to make way for some opulent shopkeeper's dame! Henrietta, I offer you my humblest apologies for the slight to which I am subjecting you. Mine is the fault. *Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.*"

The Earl sat down, and buried his face in his hands. Then the wife took the place of the mother. The Countess sat down beside him and tried to cheer him up.

"Never mind, love; don't take it so to heart. I am sure Kate will be reasonable when we talk to her. And there are still three months."

"And what are three months?" groaned Lord Claverley.

"Twelve weeks. Besides, after all, it is only a husband that we have to see after, not a footman. In the latter case I should think we were pressed for time; but now there is plenty."

"Ruin is inevitable, Henrietta; ruin is certain."

"Stuff and nonsense, Claverley, my love. There are only two things certain in this world—death and the servants' dinner. Those *must* come, whatever happens; but we are absolutely sure of nothing else."

"We shall have to leave the Castle, Henrietta—we shall be compelled to abandon the house of my fathers to strangers."

"And supposing the worst—if it comes to the worst—we shall still have each other, Claverley, and that's what really matters. It is being together that has made prosperity so delightful. I shouldn't have cared for anything if you hadn't been there to share it with me, and in the same way I shan't

mind adversity if you are still with me to be looked after and dosed and minded. After all, Claverley, love and medicine are cheap enough, and those are the only things that one can't possibly get on without."

"Henrietta," cried the Earl, "something must be done. There are those Pettigrews."

"Yes, Claverley; but don't let that letter worry you. You can write a civil refusal—or, if you like, I will do it for you."

"You don't understand me, my love. Kate has come back from Elnagar no nearer to marriage than when she went. Perhaps this young man may take her fancy. We must have them here."

The Countess rarely allowed herself to be surprised at her husband's vagaries; but now she was fairly astonished.

"But, Claverley——" she began.

"Yes, yes, my love," interrupted the Earl desperately, "I know what you are going to say. I *did* agree with you when you described the proposal as a great liberty. But I have been thinking it over. Kate must marry. She is, as you say, romantic. She may think that this young man has some claim, and so consent to marry him."

Then the Countess fairly laughed: she thought she knew her daughter better than that.

"It's quite useless, Claverley; and when you get them here you would find them intolerable. You would be bored to death, and no good could come of it."

"Henrietta," said the Earl solemnly, "we must leave no stone unturned. I shall write to this Mr. Pettigrew, and ask him and his wife to come with their son and daughter and spend a fortnight at the Castle: and I will ask you to welcome my guests." And the Earl drew himself up with stateliness.

"A fortnight, Claverley? You will be sick to death of them in a couple of days, and then you will come to me to get rid of them for you."

"My love, I think I know myself and what is due to myself

in this case. A fortnight will be none too long for the young people to become acquainted : so a fortnight it shall be."

The Countess shrugged her shoulders: but she saw that the Earl was fixed on this idea; and, true to her policy of letting men find out their mistakes for themselves, she offered no further opposition.

"Very well, my love, it shall be as you please. But I hope you will let these people know that their visit will be a quiet one, and that they must not expect us to have a house-party."

"Of course, my love, of course," said the Earl graciously. "It is with the object of getting intimately acquainted that we ask them, so that other guests would militate against the prime object of this visit. I think I shall like this Mr. Pettigrew: he has a straightforward way of putting his views without beating about the bush—a good business man, no doubt an excellent man of business. Do you know, my love, I am looking forward to this visit to afford me much gratification?"

But the Countess only laughed.

"Do you doubt my word, Henrietta?"

"Certainly not, my love; only your wisdom."

"But surely I know myself."

"Not as well as I know you."

Lord Claverley assumed his most dignified air. "Time will teach us, Henrietta, who is right, you or I."

"Good gracious, I don't need time to teach me that!" replied her ladyship, as she went out of the room, still laughing.

## CHAPTER XVII

### UNWELCOME VISITORS

“SO those tiresome relations of Mrs. MacBalloch’s are coming here to-day, Tiffany,” said Lady Kate to her old nurse; “and bringing their son and heir to find me crying, ‘Heigho, for a husband!’”

“And maybe he’ll turn out to be Mr. Right, after all, my lady: I shouldn’t be a bit surprised.”

“Then I should. There’ll never be a Mr. Right for me, Tiffy: men aren’t in my line: I hate them all.”

“Some do,” said Tiffany in a soothing voice; “but it makes all the difference when Mr. Right comes by.”

“But I wanted to keep single all my days, like Queen Elizabeth.”

“And like Misemmie: she was just such another as Queen Elizabeth—nothing but a single life for her, till Mr. Right came by, which was a curate of the name of Parkinson.”

“And then, I suppose, she was as keen to jump through a wedding-ring as a circus-girl is to jump through a hoop,” said Lady Kate.

“She was, your ladyship; a regular glutton for marriage, as you may say, was Misemmie then.”

“Mr. Parkinson seems to have been a convincing person,” Kate remarked.

“He was, my lady. But all the same, it was the course that did it.”

“What course? Surely the worthy Parkinson and the excellent Emmie didn’t meet on a race-course.”

Tiffany pursed up her lips. "Certainly not, my lady; it was a course of borrowed sermons on the ladies of the Old Testament."

"Borrowed sermons, Tiffy? Then they weren't original."

"Indeed they were, your ladyship; as original as sin."

"They how could they be borrowed?" persisted Kate.

"Mr. Parkinson called them borrowed because they were preached in Lent."

"Oh! I see; you mean Lenten sermons, Tiffy."

"Perhaps that was the exact expression; but it all comes to the same thing, my lady. What's lent must be borrowed, and *veni vice*, as the saying is. Anyway, those particular course was preached on the Friday evenings in Lent by Mr. Parkinson. Misemmie attended regular, and took notes."

The abnormal mental activity of the house of Hopkins was always a source of amusement to Kate. "How intelligent of her! Did she usually takes notes in church?"

"Only at weekday services. She wouldn't have done it on a Sunday for anything; as I've often informed your ladyship, Missisopkins brought up her children to have a great respect for the Commandments. But there's no Commandment against breaking a weekday, as, indeed, how should there be?"

"Then did Mr. Parkinson preach well, Tiffy?"

"Something wonderful, my lady. He was the sort of preacher whose every cap fits somebody, as you may say; and it took you all your time to see which of your neighbours he had got in his mind at the moment. That's the sort of preaching I like."

"Doubtless it has its charms; the faults of other people cannot be shown up too often, can they, Tiffy?"

"They cannot, my lady. I like the sort of preaching that goes home," said Tiffany.

"And by home, of course, you mean next door," added her young mistress.



But Tiffany never knew when she was being laughed at; a blissful ignorance which very much enhances the happiness of life. So she cheerfully continued: "You never wanted to go to sleep when Mr. Parkinson was preaching; for from the very minute he got into the pulpit you were so busy saying to yourself, 'That's a nasty knock for Mr. Wilkinson,' and 'That's a hit at Mrs. Smallwood,' and 'That's one for Miss Higginbotham,' and 'That's meant for the Reverend Lovibond,' that you'd never time so much as to close your eyes; and the sermon was over before you'd got all the caps properly fitted."

"There was evidently one that wasn't fitted," quoth Kate.

But her satire was lost upon the imperturbable Tiffany.

"There was often more than one, my lovey. For instance, he'd a sermon on covetousness, and to this hour I don't know if it was meant for Mr. Simpkin or Mr. Starkey; and he'd another on evil-speaking that would have done equally well for Mrs. Harbottle or Miss Littleby. It always worried me when I couldn't rightly say who he'd got in his mind's eye; it seemed as if the sermon was partly wasted, as it were, and as if you hadn't got the full flavour out of it."

"Emmie seemed to get the full flavour out of it, anyway."

"She did, my lady. It was that course that made such an impression upon her. I used to accompany her, Missisopkins not liking the young ladies to go out by themselves after dusk, even for a religious object; and I'm bound to say that I never heard such a course in my life."

"I think you said it was upon the women of the Old Testament," prompted Kate.

"It was, my lady—as applied to modern times; the heads being taken from the women of the Old Testament, and the application from the ladies of the congregation. I'm sure the one on Jephtha's daughter was a living presentiment, as you might say, of Misemmie when her papa persisted in her going in for the Cambridge Local Examination against her wishes; while in the description of Pharaoh's daughter and Moses in

the bassinette of bulrushes, I seemed to see Missisopkins herself standing once more by Masterbert's cradle."

"But which one was it that captivated Emmie?"

"I think it was the one on Ruth and Naomi, Mr. Parkinson having a maiden aunt with a cough that lived with him, and whom he had to support. But he spoke so beautiful of Ruth's devotion to her mother-in-law, and what a grand thing it was for any young lady to feel like that about her husband's female relations, that Misemmie took his aunt two bunches of grapes and a box of jujubes the very next day; and in a fortnight from that time they were keeping company."

Kate threw herself at full length upon the old nursery sofa and yawned. "Oh dear, oh dear! I wish a nice young man would come and steal my heart away by preaching about jujubes and a maiden aunt."

"Oh! my lady, you mistake me; Mr. Parkinson didn't preach about either his aunt or the jujubes by name, as you might say. He only laid down the principle."

"And the jujubes and the maiden aunt were the application. I quite understand. Now the principle of my life at the present moment is the necessity of marriage; but no man comes by with the application. I would give anything if I could fall so deeply in love with a man that the coughing of his aunt was as music in my ears; I would really! But I can't; I can't! Oh, Tiffy, why do I hate men so? It would make things so much easier if I could only feel like a sentimental schoolgirl for her music-master."

"Never mind, deary; it wouldn't last if you did. Misemmie herself got very sick of it after she was married. And she said the old lady sniffed too, which made it worse. No, lovey, mark my words; your husband's maiden aunt is no bed of roses after marriage, whatever she may be before."

When told of the approaching visit of the Pettigrews, and the object thereof, Kate had at first violently opposed the scheme, and declared that she would have no part or parcel in

the matter. But, after more than one stormy interview, she had to give way; and she languidly agreed to receive the guests with civility, and to do her best, at least, not to snub young Pettigrew, should he pay her attention—unless indeed he proved (as she averred to be absolutely certain) utterly impossible. Wherefore poor Lady Kate was restless, her mind being ill at ease; so she soon wearied of the old nursery sofa, which had supported her during many childish complaints, and strolled aimlessly into her mother's boudoir.

“Oh, mother, I do wish these horrid Pettigrews weren't coming to-day.”

Lady Claverley looked up from her writing. “How do you spell *apple*?” she asked, “with one *p* or two?”

“Two.”

But the Countess was doubtful. “Are you quite sure, Kate? It looks rather funny with two *p*'s.”

“It would look funnier with only one, mother darling.”

“Well, I suppose you know best. But I wish your father were here, so that I could ask him. He has always been such a help to me in things like that.”

But Kate hadn't come into her mother's room to talk about orthography. “Oh, I wish those horrid people weren't coming,” she repeated.

“Never mind, love; it's no use fussing about things that can't be helped—it only makes them worse. I always try not to think about unpleasant things.”

“But you can't help it when they are staying in the house, and I believe these Pettigrews will be something awful!” And Kate fairly groaned.

“I feel sure they will, and I've told your father so; but he would persist in having his own way and inviting them. So now he must take the consequences of his own mistake, and bear the burden of it,” replied Lady Claverley, contemplating with much inward satisfaction the punishment which her lord and master had prepared for himself by daring to wield his own sceptre and occupy his own throne.

"I expect they'll be fearful outsiders, and have no proper evening dresses, and eat peas with a knife, and do all sorts of horrible things."

"I fear they will," agreed Lady Claverley in a tone that meant she hoped so.

"It's something dreadful that we should be obliged to know such people!" grumbled Kate.

"It is, love; but that is all Katharine MacBalloch's fault in making such an abominable Will." Lady Claverley was far too just a woman not to lay blame where blame was due, especially when it happened to be due to one of her husband's relations. "I never could endure Mrs. MacBalloch. She was a cross, cantankerous, overbearing, domineering woman, and the fact that she is dead makes no difference in my opinion of her."

"And then the terrible little son will make love to me—papa is having him for the purpose; and I'm so tired of being made love to by men who do it out of a sense of duty—out of a sense of death-duty one might almost say."

"Are you quite certain there are two *p*'s in *apple*, Kate? It looks very queer with them now it is written," said Lady Claverley, her eyes and attention once more fixed upon her notepaper.

"Absolutely positive," persisted Kate.

But her mother was not to be so easily convinced. "I'm sure there is only one *p* in *chapel*, so why should there be two in *apple*?" she argued.

"It seems extravagant, I admit; nevertheless it is the custom to put two. But, mother, these hateful people will be here in an hour or two, and what are we to do with them?"

"Your father must entertain the men, and Sapphira must talk to the women," replied Lady Claverley. "Sapphira always gets on very well with people of that kind; they mistake her pertness for wit, and her rudeness for fine manners. She has a knack of impressing her inferiors, as her mother had before her." This was a happy reference on the part of the Countess.

Kate's thoughts were immediately diverted from coming troubles to past delights. She always found as much amusement in her mother's disquisitions on her father's relations as she did in the revelations of Tiffany concerning the domestic life of the worthy family of Hopkins.

"What was Aunt Arabella like? Was she at all like papa?"

"She had his face without any of his excellences. For my part I never could get on with her. In fact she irritated me so much that she almost made me dislike your father's nose because hers was the same shape, and that I felt was really wicked and unwifely."

"Then do you think that a woman is bound to admire her husband's nose, whatever shape it is?"

"I think she is bound to respect it, and never to see it in an unbecoming light if she can possibly help doing so. In the end I had to leave off looking at Arabella's nose, because it so lessened my respect for your father's."

"Well, mother darling, I am devoted to papa, but I cannot agree with you in admiring the shape of his nose."

"I never said I admired it, Kate; I said I respected it. One of the apostles (I forget exactly which, but I know it was one of the most influential) said that a wife ought always to reverence her husband; and quite right, too! But he never said she ought always to admire him, because that would have been absurd on the face of it. How could she? And the Bible never tells anybody to do anything that is impossible—only things that are a little difficult at times. Still, she should admire him whenever she can; because, if she doesn't, other women will. A man needs admiration, and would rather have it from his own wife than from anybody else; but if she doesn't give it to him, he won't go without."

Kate was still inclined for argument. "I don't see any difference between respect and admiration."

"Well, then, my love, you ought to. They're not at all alike really. You admire a great actor, and you respect the Sabbath.

They are totally different feelings. You can make yourself respect people, but you cannot possibly make yourself admire them."

"Oh, mother, how did you make yourself respect papa's nose? Do say."

"By always speaking of it to myself as Roman, and pretending that it was quite different from Arabella's. But as a matter of fact they are as like as two peas, and both, to my mind, a bit Jewy. I am always thankful you have my nose, Kate, and not your father's. But I wouldn't let him know this for worlds."

"What a wise mother I've got!" exclaimed Lady Kate, kissing the top of Lady Claverley's head, which was still bent over the writing-table. "Now teach me how a wife should make herself reverence her husband."

"In very much the same way. By keeping her eyes firmly fixed on him when he is in the right, and by never mentioning it when he is in the wrong, either to herself or to her own people. You soon forget things if you don't talk about them."

"But shouldn't she mention it to him?"

"Certainly not, my love; I should consider that most disrespectful. Besides, it does no good; it is always best to let a man have his own way and see for himself what a foolish way it is. It has more effect upon him than hours of talking."

"Then, mother, do you think a man ever does see when he is in the wrong?"

"Fast enough: but it doesn't do for him to know that his wife sees it; and if she is a wise woman she'll never let him discover that she does. How do you spell *Yours truly*? With an *e* or without?"

"Without," replied the referee.

"But there's an *e* in *true*, I'm sure," said the Countess, gazing critically at her paper with her head on one side.

"Of course there is, mother, but not in *truly*."

"I ought to have written this letter in the third person, and then there'd have been no *truly* in it at all. But if the spelling would have been easier, the grammar would have been more difficult—too difficult for me. Once, when Brown was away on a holiday, I had to write the butcher's order myself, and I couldn't even manage to do that in the third person. Then the man actually answered in the same style that he would attend to my order, and signed himself, 'Ever your affectionate butcher, John Jones.' I thought it so familiar of him. Are you *quite* sure, Kate, that there is no *e* in *truly*?"

"Quite sure, dearest mother; absolutely certain."

"It looks funny without the *e*. I do wish that your father were here, so that I could ask him!"

"He'd only tell you the same as I do, I'm afraid."

Lady Claverley's white forehead was puckered with hesitation and doubt. "I don't feel at all comfortable about it, Kate; I don't, indeed. And I couldn't bear to spell a word wrong, as I am writing to Mrs. Newbroom, and she is one of those dreadfully clever people who think such a lot of good spelling. I almost think I'd better put *sincerely* instead—if you don't consider it's too familiar for a person like that, and for a letter which is only about the arrangements for the Primrose League fête, and what refreshments we ought to provide."

"I really don't think it matters which you put, mother darling."

Lady Claverley looked grave. She took things of this kind very seriously. "*Sincerely* always seems rather friendly, somehow, and Mrs. Newbroom is an extremely pushing person. I wish now I'd written in the third person, only I couldn't. But it is better to be intimate than ignorant, don't you think?"

"Much better, dearest; and now do get on with your letters, or those horrid people will be here before you've

finished," replied Kate, going out of the room, and leaving Lady Claverley to continue her correspondence undisturbed.

It was tea-time when the Pettigrews arrived at Claverley Castle and found their host and his family assembled in the great hall to welcome them; and they had not been in the house ten seconds before Lady Claverley knew that her worst fears (or rather hopes) were realized. And this good lady was so delighted with her guests for being, as it were, living epistles to testify to the truth that she was right and her husband wrong, that her heart overflowed with lovingkindness towards them, which lovingkindness expressed itself in extreme graciousness of manner. As Mrs. Pettigrew afterwards confided to her husband in the seclusion of their own chamber, "the Countess evidently took to them." Had she known the reason for Lady Claverley's unexpected friendliness, she would have been less elated.

"Do come to the fire," said the hostess, when tea had been duly dispensed by Lady Kate, and the four young people had retired for conversation to a remote corner. "I am sure you must feel cold after your journey."

"I do, indeed, Lady Claverley," replied Mrs. Pettigrew in her most impressive voice; "by nature I am extremely sensitive to cold—it is a peculiarity of my family. The Pinchards have always been characterized by such very thin and delicate skins that cold and heat are alike torture to them."

"Indeed! how very trying! You should always wear wool next to the skin in that case, as that is such a protection both from heat and cold. It keeps you warm in winter and cool in the summer—just as thick boots do."

"Ah! Lady Claverley, you have touched upon another weak spot. I never can wear thick boots, even in the coldest weather, my feet are so very tender. That, again, is a family peculiarity; the Pinchards have always been noted for the delicacy, and I think I may say the smallness, of their feet."



"Dear me!" said the Countess sympathetically, "that must be a bore for you! I am such an advocate for wearing thick boots, as I think damp feet often lead to terrible results. I have always insisted on my daughter wearing thick boots, with indiarubber soles or cork, or something equally waterproof, ever since she was a little child, and I think she owes much of her good health to this."

"Alas! I cannot do the same, for my children have inherited the Pinchard feet, Lady Claverley; they cannot bear to wear any but the thinnest boots."

"Oh! I should take no notice of that; I should make them wear thick boots, whether they liked it or whether they didn't. Young people can get accustomed to anything; they are not like us."

"But my children have their great-grandmother's feet, Lady Claverley."

"Well, if they are not careful they will get rheumatism in their great-grandmother's feet. Brown paper inside the soles is a very good thing, and mustard sprinkled inside the boots is excellent. Also a dose of ammoniated quinine taken at the very beginning of a chill does a great deal of good. It often stops it altogether."

"Alas! no Pinchard ever could digest quinine."

"Then they should learn to. Believe me, it doesn't do for young people to be fussy; it is a shocking habit which they soon get into and never get out of. When I was young I could digest anything that my dear mother told me to digest, and I expect my daughter to do the same. It doesn't do for children any more than for men to have the control of their own digestions; they are quite incapable of managing them."

Here Lord Claverley interrupted the ladies' conversation. "My love, Mr. Pettigrew was just informing me that this is his first visit—positively his first visit—to our part of the world."

The Countess smiled to herself. Already her husband was

compelled to seek her help in entertaining his own particular guest—a sure sign of ignominious defeat! The woman longed to leave him to hang himself with the rope which he had persisted in swinging contrary to her advice; but the wife came to his rescue.

“Is it indeed, Mr. Pettigrew?” she said. “But I don’t think one can be surprised at that, as it is rather an out-of-the-way place. Of course we like it, because we live here, and it is our home; but I don’t think it is particularly interesting to strangers.” Whereby she subtly conveyed to the mind of Ebenezer that he was by no way at a disadvantage in not knowing the neighbourhood of Claverley Castle, but rather the reverse. Lady Claverley had admirable manners.

Mr. Pettigrew rubbed his hands together. “It has been a disadvantage to me, Lady Claverley, that my lot has been cast in the habitable parts of the earth, and that I have all my life been a dweller in cities. Dearly should I have loved to read for myself the book of nature, and to trace in it the workings of that higher power which men call Providence; but my life has been ordered differently, and it is not for me to complain.”

“Really I don’t think you’ve any cause for complaint,” replied the Countess graciously. “I always quite envy the people who live in or near London; they are so close to the centre of things, and never have the chance of growing dull and stupid as we country folks do.”

“Lady Claverley, pray do not say the word. Those—such as yourself—who study the book of nature, find in it as profound truths as do we who read the hearts of men. Nay, their lore is often of a higher and purer character, for nature is ever pure and true, while the human heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.” Ebenezer was not to be outdone in graciousness.

“And then you always meet such interesting people in London,” continued the Countess; “there you can pick and

choose your friends, but in the country you have to take what you can get in the way of society, and make the best of it."

"It is always ennobling and elevating to be brought into contact with the great ones of the earth," said Mrs. Pettigrew; "it enlarges one's mind and extends one's views."

"It certainly does; and keeps one from growing narrow and provincial, and thinking that one's own little world is all the universe. And it helps one to talk about things rather than about people; and talking about people is such a bad habit to get into—especially for the young."

By "the great ones of the earth" Lady Claverley meant Royalties and Prime Ministers, while Mrs. Pettigrew meant Mayors and Aldermen; but, though the application might be different, the principle was the same.

"For my part, I love all change and variety," added Mrs. Pettigrew; "the Pinchards have ever been birds of passage, and I still feel in my blood the wings of my ancestors, pluming themselves for flight."

"Dear me! that must be most uncomfortable," said Lady Claverley; "it would make me quite giddy."

"Not at all; I am accustomed to these re-incarnations of my ancestors. But what does exhaust me is when I feel two opposite natures at war with each other in my soul—a good and an evil Pinchard struggling for the mastery."

Lady Claverley looked sympathetic. "That must indeed be dreadful—almost like taking the two parts of a seidlitz powder separately!"

"It is trying, I admit; but it is the price one has to pay for a long and mixed line of ancestry. Our forefathers—both good and bad—live again in us. Atavism is a strange thing, is it not, Lord Claverley?"

The Earl had not an idea what she was talking about, and looked helplessly at his better half; and once again the wife triumphed over the woman. Lady Claverley knew no more than did her husband what *atavism* meant; but she would

not for worlds have let the Pettigrews discover that the word was not an integral part of his daily vocabulary. "I don't much believe in heredity," she remarked hastily, "it's a hobby that has lately been ridden to death."

Mrs. Pettigrew fairly gasped. Here were her household gods being overthrown in her very presence, and her sanctuaries defiled. "Oh! Lady Claverley, pray, pray do not say such a thing."

"But I think it. Nowadays people seem to imagine that they can do what they like, and then send the bill in to their grandparents; and it is a most dangerous doctrine, as it does away with all sense of personal responsibility. For my part, I don't think a man has a right to go sneezing all over the place, simply because his great-grandmother took snuff. And that principle runs through everything."

But Mrs. Pettigrew's gods died hard. "Surely, Lady Claverley, you must hold with me that our ancestors live again in us, their descendants."

"I don't hold anything of the kind; and I know I should be extremely sorry if some of mine did. I think our ancestors were most stupid people, and lamentably ignorant with regard to all questions of health and diet. My wonder is that they ever lived long enough to have any descendants at all, considering the unsuitable things they ate and drank, and the absurd things they wore."

"But don't you think, Lady Claverley, that those of us who have been blessed with the privilege of a long line of ancestors are wiser and better, and more highly intelligent than those who owe their origin to a newer stock?"

"I can't say that I do; Lord Claverley's family is a much older one than mine," replied the Countess, feeling that this modern instance was irrefutable in proving the soundness of her argument. As indeed it was.

Here Mr. Pettigrew again joined in the conversation. "My dear wife sets a little too much store on the advantages of

nobility of birth, Lady Claverley ; it is her one—I think I may say her only—weakness.”

“And a very creditable one—very creditable, indeed !” exclaimed the host.

“Nevertheless, my lord, we are all sons and daughters of Adam ; and to my mind there is something unseemly in miserable worms of earth thus setting themselves up, one against the other, as I am constantly telling Mrs. P., and I can see that your good lady agrees with me. Is not that so, Lady Claverley ?”

“Entirely,” replied the Countess, who had not heard what he was saying, her mind at that time being occupied in wondering whether the luggage had all been carried upstairs, and if her guests could therefore go to their rooms.

“Alas !” exclaimed Mrs. Pettigrew, “it is in this that I pay the penalty of having been born a Pinchard—a daughter of that indomitable race whose fate it is to live again in each one of their descendants.”

“Dear me, how very uncomfortable.” remarked Lady Claverley, recalling her wandering thought from the luggage with some effort.

“Yes, Lady Claverley, I have inherited strange gifts from my dead-and-gone ancestors—notably the gift of second sight. Whenever misfortune threatens one of my name and race, a black shadow invariably flits before my eyes.”

“That’s pastry, Mrs. Pettigrew : you may feel sure of that,” cried Lady Claverley, who had long ago fixed her canon against self-slaughter in the form of pastry. “Lord Claverley is just the same. In fact one mince-pie will make him see such a number of little black specks that I’ve had to forbid my house-keeper to allow any to appear on the table. Isn’t that so, Claverley ?”

“It is, my love,” replied the accused : then turning to Mrs. Pettigrew with his courtly bow, “My wife always persists that those shadowy appearances are reminders of past indiscretions, rather than warnings of future misfortunes.”

“They’re warnings *against* future misfortunes, Claverley, if that’s what you mean—warnings not to eat any more mince-pies.”

Mrs. Pettigrew could not help feeling that the great gift of the Pinchards had somehow missed fire this time: but she bravely made another attempt. “There is another weird tradition in the Pinchard family: whenever death threatens one of them, he always hears church bells ringing in his ears. Wherever he is or whatever he is doing, suddenly and without any warning the mysterious peal clangs through his head, and he knows that he is doomed.”

“Stomach, Mrs. Pettigrew, all stomach: but I should think that particular symptom arises from too much butcher’s meat; and I should advise the Mr. Pinchard who is suffering from it to take more milk and vegetable diet and abstain from animal food for a week or two, or else he will soon be dead as you seem to expect.”

Mrs. Pettigrew was fairly knocked flat. Was this the society for which her soul had thirsted for so long? In her imagination Countesses were people who lived upon air and talked of nothing more material than lilies—ethereal creatures who soared far above the common paths of everyday life. And yet here was a *bonâ fide* one—of undeniable rank and undoubted beauty—making familiar use of a word which Mrs. Pettigrew did not like to think was even in the dictionary.

Poor Mrs. Pettigrew! She was not the first person to discover that expectation and fulfilment are by no means synonymous terms.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A TARDY REPENTANCE

THE visit of the Pettigrews to Claverley Castle went on very much as it began: that is to say it was a failure in every respect save one; it succeeded in pointing the moral that it is a mistake for any householder—even though he be an Earl—to act in opposition to his wife's sounder judgment.

They had been there for four days—four days that to Lord Claverley were a synonym for eternity: but the Countess had her compensation in a mind conscious not only of her own wisdom, but also of her husband's folly—and in his consciousness of both these great truths also. And no true wife who knows she is right—and who knows that her husband knows she is right—is altogether to be pitied. She has an inward peace which can support her under a considerable amount of wear and tear.

The young people got on better together than did their elders. There is a certain freemasonry in youth which overleaps social barriers—if anything so solid as freemasonry can be said to leap. Kate did not altogether like the Pettigrews, but she disliked them less than her mother did—or at any rate less than her mother would have disliked them had not the Earl disliked them more. As guests, they were intolerable to Lady Claverley: but as her husband's Nemesis, they were not altogether without merit in the eyes of the Countess.

For three long days Lord Claverley bore his burden like a man. No murmur crossed his lips. But on the fourth he broke down completely, and the man became merged in the husband.

“Henrietta,” he exclaimed in the seclusion of his wife’s boudoir, “I cannot—positively cannot—stand another day of those terrible people. They are simply insufferable!”

“Never mind, love,” said Lady Claverley in her most soothing tones; “four days is more than half a week, and you only asked them for a fortnight, you know.”

The culprit groaned aloud. His sin had found him out with a vengeance. “Oh! Henrietta—surely not a fortnight?”

“Yes, Claverley; you particularly mentioned a fortnight. You said it would give the young people time to get to know each other in case the son fell in love with Kate, if you remember.”

“Ah! yes, yes; so I did, so I did. But things have turned out differently from what I imagined and intended, Henrietta; quite differently. The Pettigrews are not in the least—not in the very least—the kind of people that I expected them to be.”

“That’s funny, for they are exactly the sort of people that I expected them to be; and you are generally so wise and far-seeing, Claverley.”

“But surely, surely, my love, you never expected them to be as bad as this.”

“I did—quite.”

“Henrietta, do you know I am afraid—I am sorely afraid that this time I have made a mistake.” The Earl was almost abject in his contrition.

His wife smiled her pleasantest smile. “Don’t worry about it, Claverley, you did it for the best, you know; and everybody is liable to make mistakes at times.” By “everybody” she meant every man.

“Yes, my love. I have made a mistake—a most egregious mistake. I think that without self-flattery I may say that I rarely—very rarely—do anything foolish.”

“Because, as a rule, I prevent you,” added the Countess to herself; but she did not speak this openly with her lips.



"But on this occasion," the Earl continued, "I fear I have proved the truth of the Latin saying, *Nemo mortalium omnibus horis sapit*. I have not been at all times wise."

"Talking of omnibuses," said his wife, "reminds me that one of the springs of ours is broken; and it had better be mended, as it will be wanted to take the Pettigrews to the station when they leave."

Lord Claverley cheered up visibly at the mere thought of the departure. "Of course, of course, Henrietta; it shall be done at once, at once. I will give the order myself, so that no time may be lost."

But the Countess was merciless. "There's no particular hurry," she said sweetly, "but it had better be seen to some time during the next week or two."

Her husband's spirits fell as rapidly as they had risen. There was a slight pause; and then his voice was quite pathetic as he asked, "Did you say a fortnight, Henrietta?"

"It was you that said a fortnight—when you invited them, you know. You insisted on enclosing a note in mine, pressing them to come, and mentioning the length of their visit. You said my invitation seemed a little vague and curt, if you remember, and that you would add a line of pressure."

"Yes, yes; I recall the circumstance now you mention it."

"I thought it so very kind and friendly of you, Claverley; but you always are nicer to people of that sort than I am."

The Earl's penitence broke out afresh. "Henrietta, I have been a fool; I regret to say it, my love, but I have been a fool of the finest water."

Inexorable justice was appeased; therefore mercy took its place. "Oh! Claverley, don't use such violent and profane language as that. Perhaps you did allow your kind heart and your spirit of hospitality to carry you away: I can't deny that you did; but you meant it for the best."

"I did, Henrietta; I certainly meant it for the best. You may believe that, I assure you."

Lady Claverley believed him implicitly. In fact she never had any doubts as to the excellence of her husband's intentions; it was only in the manner of carrying them out that she felt he sometimes erred.

"The fact is, Henrietta, I made a mistake in not being guided by your judgment instead of by my own. In matters of this kind you are always so much wiser than I."

But a woman who had triumphed so gloriously could afford to be generous, though it must be admitted that the women who triumph as a rule are not. "Indeed, I'm nothing of the kind, Claverley" (though she knew all the time she was); "and I always think an immense deal of your opinion and advice" (though she never by any chance was guided by them); "but in this case, perhaps my view did turn out to be the correct one. It showed what a much better disposition yours is than mine for you to expect people with such a name as Pettigrew to behave nicely. I often envy you your sweet disposition and your habit of thinking the best of people. Poor dear mamma used always to say what a lovely nature you had—even in those days she was struck with it—and she said I ought to thank Heaven for having given me a husband who believed what he was told; it saved so much trouble."

No woman grudges her husband the harmlessness of the dove, provided that she herself is equipped with the wisdom of the serpent.

Lord Claverley cheered up considerably—as, indeed, he had every right to do. It is not given to every man to have a wife who contradicts him when he confesses that he has been in the wrong.

"Of course, Henrietta, you will agree with me in considering that the mere idea of a marriage between Kate and that young cub is preposterous in the extreme."

"Certainly, my love," replied Lady Claverley warmly, generously refraining from adding that the aforesaid idea had been entirely her husband's.

“You agree with me in giving it up *in toto*—in placing such an event beyond the region of practical politics—in putting it outside the line of possibility?” persisted the Earl.

“Entirely,” replied her ladyship, who had never entertained the idea for a single instant; “you have convinced me, Claverley, that such a thing would be preposterous.”

“Quite so, my love, quite so. I am very glad to find that I have thus succeeded in persuading you that my judgment on this matter, at any rate, is sound. I am therefore to understand that you give up all thought of this proposed marriage as absolutely as I do; is that so?”

“Yes, Claverley, of course it is. I shouldn’t dream of disputing your wisdom.” As, indeed, she never did—when it coincided with her own.

“Then that is right, my love, quite right. I am very glad that I have made you see eye to eye with me in this matter. It greatly strengthens my confidence in my own decisions when they are supported by yours—very greatly indeed.”

Then inexorable justice became more merciful—it became positively indulgent. Once more the woman was merged in the wife—though, it must be admitted, not before the woman had had a fair innings.

“By the way, Claverley, I forgot to mention that I don’t think those dreadful people will stay the full fortnight. In fact I gathered from something Mrs. Pettigrew said when I wasn’t attending that they’ll leave at the end of the week.”

The relief was almost too sudden—too intense. It quite took away the Earl’s breath.

“You don’t mean to say, Henrietta, that they are going—positively going?”

“I fancy so, though I don’t remember exactly what the woman said, as I wasn’t listening. I’m so sick of those dreadful Pinchards that I never listen to her if I can help it; but all the time she is talking I keep counting imaginary sheep going through a gate—as you do when you can’t go to

sleep, and it makes you ten times more wakeful than ever. But I did catch something about their shortening their visit."

"Oh, Henrietta, I wonder you did not hear that—I am sure I should have heard it, whatever I might have been doing at the time. I am surprised it did not at once strike your ear and arrest your wandering attention."

"It did, or else I shouldn't know anything about it now. But hush!—there she is coming."

Lord Claverley looked aghast. "Coming here—coming to your boudoir, Henrietta? What an impertinence—what an intrusion!"

"Oh, it is her way; she doesn't mean to be rude. Women of that class spend half their time in one another's bedrooms; it is their idea of friendship."

Insulted majesty sat enthroned on the Earl's brow. But there came a tap at the door; then discretion proved the better part of valour, and he fled.

"Come in," said Lady Claverley, smiling to herself; and the unconscious intruder entered.

"This is an eventful day in my history, Lady Claverley," she remarked, sitting down uninvited upon the most comfortable chair in the room; "a milestone on the road of my married life. It is the anniversary of the day when Mr. Pettigrew and I plighted our troth at the altar—the day when a Pinchard became a Pettigrew—in short, it is our wedding-day."

At the word "Pinchard" Lady Claverley at once opened her imaginary gate, and marshalled her imaginary sheep in single file.

"Indeed; how very interesting!" she said to her visitor. To herself she murmured, "One—two—three."

"I venerate the day," continued Mrs. Pettigrew, "as I venerate all such days. It is a peculiar trait of the Pinchard family that no anniversary should pass unhonoured and unkept. To a true Pinchard it is almost a religion to regard

with veneration the date upon which family events occur, and to set them apart as sacred festivals."

"I think that is a bad habit," remarked Lady Claverley aloud; adding *sotto voce*, "twenty-five—twenty-six—twenty-seven."

"Alas! but one cannot eradicate the habits of one's line and race, even if they are not altogether beneficial; that is the price we have to pay for a long—and not always a creditable—line of ancestry. But in this particular habit I can perceive nothing reprehensible, unless it may savour somewhat of paganism so to keep times and seasons; and, as I am always telling Mr. P., the Pinchards have a strong strain of paganism in their blood."

"Dear me, how very uncomfortable! Thirty-two—thirty-three—thirty-four."

"But I think it is often so, Lady Claverley, with those ancient families who are so near akin to the earth from which they sprang. Is there no taint, no touch of paganism in your family, Lady Claverley?"

"Certainly not. We were Presbyterians when we were in Scotland, and Evangelical Church of England when we came up to London for the season; Lady Dunbar wouldn't have allowed anything else." The Countess was quite shocked that such a question should have been asked.

"Ah! Lady Claverley, then you will hardly understand the passion of the Pinchards for times and seasons and all earth-born festivals."

"I don't; I don't understand it at all."

There are certain persons—generally poets and the like—who are speaking in praise of anything when they describe it as mysterious and incomprehensible and not to be understood. But Lady Claverley was not one of these.

"I never can see the point," she went on, "of keeping wedding-days and things like that. If you are married at all, you're married just as much on the anniversary of one day as

another ; it isn't as if you were married by the year, and had to decide every time the date came round whether you'd renew your lease. I was married myself on the sixteenth of April, but nothing would induce me to remember the date, or to let Lord Claverley remember it either."

"But surely, Lady Claverley, there can be no harm in this habit, which obtains among the Pinchards, of noting and keeping these special days."

"Yes, there is ; great harm. It is sentimental ; and there is always harm in that. Lady Dunbar brought us all up to have a great horror of sentiment."

Mrs. Pettigrew uttered a little melodramatic shriek. "Oh ! Lady Claverley, how can you say such things ? Sentiment is as the very breath of my nostrils."

"Then you ought to wear a respirator, for it is a most unhealthy atmosphere ; it gives people such wrong notions."

"But, Lady Claverley, don't you revel in some kind of sentiment—in sentimental songs, for instance ?"

"Certainly not ; I can't bear them, they are such nonsense, and worse than nonsense. I remember hearing one when I was younger about somebody knowing that somebody else must have loved him because the angels told him so ; and I thought it so wrong as well as foolish, and so misleading about the angels, because we know, as a matter of fact, that angels take no interest in love affairs ; they're not supposed to ; and therefore it's most unorthodox, as well as being so bad for young people, to pretend that they do."

"Ah ! but, Lady Claverley, don't you think that even if untrue the idea was very, very beautiful ?"

"I can't say that I do. I'm sure I should have been very much surprised when I was a girl if an angel had said anything about me to Lord Claverley ; I should have considered it most uncalled for, and most improper."

Lady Claverley was quite cross—for her. But she was still smarting under the charge of paganism.

"The fact is, Lady Claverley," said the intruder, "I have come to announce to you our forthcoming departure; Mr. P. and I are compelled shortly to return to town."

"That is indeed unfortunate," replied the Countess politely—though she did not specify for whom; "Lord Claverley hoped that you would stay with us a fortnight."

"He said so in his kind—his too kind—letter, Lady Claverley, which touched me to the quick. The Pinchards are always peculiarly sensitive to kindness—and especially to kindness shown them by the great ones of the earth."

"Are they indeed?" replied Lady Claverley drily, thinking that if the Pinchards knew more about the great ones of the earth they would probably feel less.

"Yes, Lady Claverley. They have such an affinity with the nobly-born that a kind word from the aristocracy is as balm in Gilead to them."

The Countess smiled to herself. She felt that the word *balm* was hardly descriptive of her husband's expressions respecting his visitors; but she was so grateful to them for going that she swallowed even the Pinchards amiably.

"Well, if you feel you must leave us, Mrs. Pettigrew, you must, and it is no good pressing you to stay. It always annoys me dreadfully when people press me to stay after I have decided to leave a place; and I judge you by myself. I always say at once what I mean and what I want, and I can't bear to be pressed to unsay it."

But Mrs. Pettigrew was of the nature of persons who love to be entreated to unsay their say; it was her idea of good manners to press, and of refinement to require pressing. She had expected her hostess to endeavour to alter her decision to leave Claverley Castle; but Lady Claverley knew better.

"Of course Mr. P. might possibly arrange—I don't say that he could manage it, but he might try—to stay on an extra day or two, if you think his lordship will be hurt at our seeming indifference to his kind hospitality."

Lady Claverley hastened to set her guest's mind at ease on that score. "Oh! but I don't; I'm sure he wouldn't; Lord Claverley isn't at all that sort of person."

"Still, I wouldn't hurt his feelings for worlds. The Pinchards are all so peculiarly sensitive—it is one of our family characteristics—that we shrink from inflicting that pain upon others which we feel would be more than we could ourselves bear. Lord Claverley has been so extremely kind and condescending to us, that I consider it would be base ingratitude on our part to do anything which might wound that noble breast."

Lady Claverley felt that consideration for the feelings of others might be carried too far. "I can assure you, Mrs. Pettigrew, that Lord Claverley is a most reasonable person; and he would be dreadfully annoyed if you altered your plans and postponed your return to town out of consideration for him." Wherein she stated no less than the truth.

"Then do you really think, Lady Claverley, that the distinguished nobleman who has welcomed us, so to speak, with open arms to his ancestral mansion, will not construe our return to our own home before the appointed time as any reflection upon his kind hospitality?"

"I'm positively certain that he won't," replied the Countess, with difficulty restraining a laugh at the discrepancy between her husband as he was and her husband as Mrs. Pettigrew imagined him.

"And you will perhaps explain to him, Lady Claverley, if he seems at all pained by our departure, that it was a board-meeting and not ingratitude that took Mr. Pettigrew back to town."

"I will certainly do so if he seems at all inclined to fret," replied Lady Claverley. And this time she really was obliged to laugh; but she pretended it was a cough, and trusted that Mrs. Pettigrew was taken in by it.

"Then in that case, Lady Claverley, I fear we must arrange to return to our own home not later than Thursday—the day



after to-morrow. There is Mr. P.'s board-meeting on Friday ; and Saturday is my eldest sister's birthday, when we make a rule of always dining with her, the Pinchards being, as I told you, such a family for keeping these anniversaries."

"I know ; and I think it so nice of them," replied Lady Claverley, forgetting that she had said the opposite not ten minutes ago. But she felt that any occasion was blessed which removed the Pettigrews from Claverley Castle ; and from the depths of her heart she wished Mrs. Pettigrew's eldest sister many happy returns of the day.

There is nothing more humorous—and more pathetic—than the difference in different people's sense of perspective. One man's mountain is another man's mole-hill, and *vice versâ*, which is the corner-stone of many people's jokes and of most people's tragedies. The Claverleys of this world are bored to death by the Pettigrews' visits ; and the Pettigrews hesitate to shorten these latter for fear of hurting the Claverleys' feelings. What a tragic comedy and a comical tragedy it all is ! We put ourselves to considerable inconvenience in order to avoid giving pain to another, never realising that it is quite out of our power to give either pain or pleasure in that quarter at all ; we offer up our choicest treasures before another's shrine, never understanding that what we consider meet for the altar is in his eyes only fit for the wastepaper-basket. We lift a burden from off a comrade's shoulders, and are almost bowed down and crushed under the weight thereof ; and we never learn, till too late, that the thing which overwhelmed us was but a featherweight to him, which he would as soon have carried as not ! We choose the thorny mountain path in order to leave the pleasant valley for beloved feet to tread ; and then, at the journey's end, find out that the mountain which has been too hard and high for us would have been to them but the veriest mole-hill.

In this world the gift is valued according to the standard of the receiver—not according to the standard of the giver ; men

judge us not by effort, but by result. It is not what a thing has cost, but what a thing will fetch, that decides its market-price; it is the scored success, and not the secret struggle, that wins the crown. How merrily we laugh at what we call the presumption of certain persons who are foolish enough to imagine that their poor best is worthy even of our passing consideration! It may be all that they have to give, but it is infinitely less than we are accustomed to receive. Hence the joke. And how we scorn the strenuous and futile efforts which some poor folks make in order to achieve what we ourselves can so easily accomplish with no effort all! Our success is less trouble than their failure. Hence the tragedy.

But the joke would be even more absurd than it is, and the tragedy even more bitter, if there had not once been a story told of a certain poor widow who cast two mites into the treasury.

There is a Standard of actual worth rather than market value; there is a Judge who judges not by results, but by endeavour.

## CHAPTER XIX

### SAMUEL PROPOSES

IT was the last day of the Pettigrews' visit to Claverley Castle. Do we not all know the exquisite peace and the genial atmosphere of the last day of a hated visit? The air is already light with the coming relief, and the strain is so lessened by our knowledge of its imminent breakage that we are hardly conscious of any strain at all. We are so thankful that our guests are going, that we could almost thank them for having come; and, unless we are wise in our generation, we shall—in our overwhelming joy at their departure—be tempted to ask them to come again.

And the happiness is often none the less ecstatic when we are the visitors instead of the visited. Then we become profuse in our expressions of gratitude for blessings which most certainly brighten as they prepare to take their flight. We are so gracious, so condescending, that our hosts—poor fools!—in the kindness of their hearts beg us to come again; and wonder—in the innocence of their minds—why they did not begin to like us earlier in the visit. They little guess the reason. They regret that we are not staying longer, now that at last they and we seem to get on so well together, and they confide to their friends, after we are gone, that we are the “sort of people who require knowing,” little dreaming that it is because they know us so little that they like us so much.

And we are not really humbugs—not a bit of it! We seem glad because we are glad, and there is no pretence about our joy: it is real and unfeigned. It is only with regard to the cause of it that good manners and Christian charity alike

compel us to be reticent. All of which is extremely funny, and not a little pathetic.

And what is the reason of it all?

The reason simply is that we can none of us bear to face the obvious, the inevitable conclusion that there are some people who do not like us, and who never will; and, further, that these persons are in no way to blame for their lack of appreciation of our own excellences. We very rarely own that another person does not like us, and when we do, we always mention it in the same tone of voice that we should use if we were accusing that other person of not remembering his Creator. We do not, cannot, realize that the liking of ourselves is merely a matter of taste and not a question of duty; we are incapable of understanding that anybody can actually dislike the sound of our voices and the shape of our noses, and yet be accounted free from sin. Yet if only we could grasp this fundamental truth, we should neither inflict our society upon those who do not enjoy it, nor bore ourselves with enduring theirs; we should confine ourselves to intercourse with those kindred spirits who have a certain affinity with us, and we should leave the rest alone—but with no bitterness or resentment. If a man does not happen to like us, he is no more to blame than if he does not like roast beef or Italian sonnets: people cannot help their natural tastes and preferences.

But Mrs. Pettigrew had never faced a fact in her life—not even the most ordinary one—without first putting a veil over it; so she could hardly be expected to comprehend the subtler forms of social truth. Ebenezer was no whit behind his wife in the fine art of self-deception: but Samuel—for all his faults—had a clearer spiritual vision.

It was on the last afternoon of the Pettigrews' visit that the four young people were chatting together in Lady Kate's sitting-room.

"It does seem a shame that we have got to go home to-morrow," sighed Matilda, "just as it was beginning to do us

all good, and we were getting to like each other. I do wish pa could have stayed a bit longer."

"It certainly is a pity," said Lady Kate politely. Although recent events had considerably modified the asperities of that young lady's character, there was still a certain modicum of the old woman left in her. The removal of the leopard's spots is at best but a tardy process. Therefore it happened that during the sojourn of the Pettigrews under the parental roof she had frequently fallen into her old habit of humming sacred music. In fact, she had run through several oratorios since they came, not to mention a score or two of hymn-tunes.

Sapphira gallantly stepped into the breach: she was at her best on occasions of this kind. When other people expected her to look down upon them, she was amiability itself; but when she expected other people to look down upon her, she was extremely disagreeable. Some of us shine with superiors, some with inferiors, and some of us shine not at all: Miss Lestrangle belonged to the second order of beings.

"But that is the way with all things," she said; "the last of everything is always so much nicer than the beginning, as Solomon once remarked, or words to that effect. And it is such a pity; for you never begin to eat your cake until after you've finished it, and so you get no fun out of it at all except the bit of candied peel at the top."

"I don't see where the pity comes in," argued Samuel: "it's a very good thing to find out you like it at last; and then you are ready to enjoy it the next time right through."

The bare idea of a "next time" with regard to the Pettigrews' stay at Claverley started Lady Kate full tilt upon the *Evening Hymn*.

"Still, it would have been better to enjoy it the first time as well," replied Sapphira.

"No, it wouldn't," Samuel persisted: "it makes it all the jollier the second time if you haven't liked it at the first."

"Oh, Sammy, don't argue so," entreated Matilda.

"I'm not arguing: I'm only saying what I think."

"That is the essence of argument," said Sapphira, "given that the other person thinks differently."

"No, it isn't, Miss Lestrangle."

"But I think it is."

"Then I'm sure it isn't."

"Well, it really doesn't matter, does it?"

"Yes, Miss Lestrangle, it does," persisted the indefatigable Sammy. "To begin with, what do you mean by the word 'argument'?"

Now, this really was hard upon Sapphira; and all of us who have been in the same strait should pity her. It is always hard and against universal justice when we make a random statement just for the sake of promoting cheerful conversation, and then are called upon to stand to our guns.

"Argument," said Sapphira, "is the art of stating the same fact or opinion over and over again in the same words, but a louder tone of voice, until all our hearers are convinced that we are right."

"I don't see what a louder tone of voice has to do with it," retorted Samuel.

"Don't you? Then you've never listened to an argument."

"But he has taken part in lots," said Matilda.

"Fortunately—or unfortunately—one never hears the sound of one's own voice," remarked Sapphira.

Then at last Kate—having just concluded the *Evening Hymn*—joined in the conversation. Being a pretty woman, she could look on unmoved while a conversation died a natural death, without making any attempt to prolong its existence: being a plain woman, Sapphira could not.

"It is a horrid afternoon," she said, gazing out of the window across the dusky park.

Sapphira as usual took up the conversational ball and threw it back. "It is beginning to snow, I think."

"That isn't snow—that's sleet," was Samuel's instant rejoinder.

Miss LeStrange shrugged her shoulders. "Snow by any other name would smell as sweet."

"It couldn't," answered the heir of all the Pinchards, "because, to begin with, it doesn't smell at all."

"Oh, Sam, what a story! It always smells like the dust off old books, and tastes worse." Matilda cherished a hopeless and unrequited affection for Miss LeStrange, and always tried to defend her from Samuel's attacks.

The brotherly answer was a loud guffaw. "And when have you tasted dust or snow, I should like to know—eh, my dear?"

"Often; whenever I get any on my fingers." Matilda's reply was convincing in its crude simplicity.

"By the way, Miss Pettigrew," said Sapphira kindly, "I haven't shown you that old book of fashions that I promised. If you'll come with me to my room, I'll do it now." And she went out of the room, followed by the humbly adoring Matilda, leaving Lady Kate and Samuel together.

For a few seconds Kate drummed upon the window-pane an instrumental accompaniment to her vocal rendering of *The Sicilian Vespers*; the silence—or rather the absence of speech—was rudely broken by Samuel. "I say, I want to speak to you."

Kate started. "Good gracious, Mr. Pettigrew, how you made me jump! I didn't know you were in the room."

"You must have done; I've been here for the last hour."

"Indeed! I hadn't noticed you." Even the new Kate was far too handsome a woman to be invariably polite.

"Well, I have; and I stayed on, because I wanted to sit the others out, and have a word with you by yourself."

"Heigho!" sighed Kate to herself, "he is on the marry. I suppose I'd better let him propose and get it over." Aloud the new Kate said, "Yes, Mr. Pettigrew, is there anything that I can do for you?"

"There is, Lady Katharine; one thing, and only one."

The old Kate laughed to herself. "Only one thing—and that is to marry you; I know a trick worth two of that, my

young friend." But the new Kate said in quite a gentle tone of voice, "I wonder what that can be."

"Can't you guess?"

"No, I can't. Please tell me." By this time the two Kates were in open opposition. Much as the old Kate had hated the idea of marrying a man, she had always enjoyed refusing one; consequently she began once more to fall in with the old sport. Yet, on the other hand, the new Kate—with all her fresh sense of the responsibilities of life, all her new-born knowledge of its graver realities—shrank from adding one iota to the terrible sum-total of the pain of the world. Therefore she spoke far more kindly than was her wont in such circumstances.

"Yes, you can. Don't tell me that a clever girl like you can't see through a stone wall as far as most people."

"I can't this time; I really can't, Mr. Pettigrew."

"Then try. There's one thing—only one thing in the whole world—that you can do for me; and if only you'll do it, I'll be grateful to you for the rest of my life. Now will you do it? That's the query."

"I'll try; but I can't promise till I know what it is."

"Rubbish! You know fast enough what it is. You're only having me on."

"You really will have to tell me, Mr. Pettigrew. I'm dreadfully stupid at guessing riddles, and finding out puzzles and things of that kind. Please tell me." And she threw a look at him which would have turned a head of wood and melted a heart of stone.

Sam, having neither the one nor the other, succumbed at once. "Well, then, I suppose you know what I was brought here for."

"For a pleasant visit, I conclude."

"Not I. I was brought here because pa and the Earl wanted you and me to make a match of it, ma being so put out at our having lost Mrs. MacBalloch's money, which we had no more right to than the man in the moon. But ma's



such a one for getting maggots into her brain, with all that Pinchard nonsense, and goodness knows what !”

“Well?” Lady Kate was immensely interested. She had never before been proposed to in this wise, and she revelled in new experiences.

“Surely, now, you can guess what it is that I want you to do for me, that will make me happy for the rest of my life.”

Kate was too much amused to be angry. “I suppose you want me to marry you,” she said good-naturedly.

Samuel started from his seat as if he had been stung. “Lord, no ! That’s the very last thing I want you to do. I want you to refuse me.”

It was now Kate’s turn to look surprised. “To refuse you? I don’t quite understand.”

“Oh ! do refuse me, Lady Katharine, please do. I shall never have any peace if you don’t. If only you’ll oblige a fellow just this once I’ll do anything in the world you want in return, I will indeed.” Sam became almost eloquent in the earnestness of his entreaty. “You can’t think what a time I shall have if you won’t refuse me. Pa won’t give me any rest, nor ma won’t either. It’s no trouble to you, Lady Kate, to do a little thing like this ; and it will make all the difference to me.”

Kate began to bubble over with mirth. “Then you don’t want me to marry you?”

“Lord, no ! I wouldn’t marry a temper such as yours for anything—not for twice Mrs. MacBalloch’s fortune, though I won’t deny that you’ve got points, and are a very nice girl all round. But if you’ll only oblige me in this little matter—and tell pa and ma that you’ve done it—I’ll be the best chum to you that a girl ever had—honour bright.”

Kate laughed loud and long. “Oh ! yes, I’ll refuse you, of course I will, with the greatest pleasure,” she cried between her outbursts.

“And you’ll tell pa and ma so?”

“Certainly, if they ask me.”

Samuel mopped his brow with relief. “Then that’s settled ;

and I shan't forget in a hurry what you've done for me. You're a real good sort, that's what you are, Lady Kate—in spite of your bit of temper. I'm your friend for life. Shake hands on it."

"Thank you," replied Lady Kate, stretching out her hand.

"And you won't forget that I've made you an offer?"

"No; I'll give you a receipt for it if you like."

Thus Samuel Pettigrew proposed to Lady Katharine Clare. He was the first man who had done so and received the answer that he wished to receive. Happy Samuel! It is always so much more satisfactory to get what we want than to get what other people want us to want: though but few of us are wise enough to realize this.

But though Samuel himself might be satisfied at the turn affairs had taken, Samuel's father and mother were quite the reverse. Ebenezer had set his heart on a marriage between his son and Mrs. MacBalloch's heiress, and had persuaded himself that Almighty Wisdom saw eye to eye with him in this matter. Therefore he believed that in thus opposing his own personal wishes the young people were flying in the face of Providence; and further, that no means were unjustifiable which would prevent them from taking their own course. He always was convinced that his own individual wishes bore the stamp of a Divine Command, and nothing would shake him in this by no means peculiar conviction. It is a most convenient form of service when "I ought to" waits upon "I would." It makes the getting of one's own way a duty as well as a delight. And with careful training and judicious management it has always been possible to teach inclination to play the part of conscience from the days of the Spanish Inquisition downwards.

The day after the departure of the Pettigrews George Despard arrived at the Castle. There were divers business matters which required consideration, and although under the terms of the Will he had full power to deal with them, he did not think it right to take important action, during the period

of his brief authority, without consulting Lady Kate, who would be—unless she persisted in a self-denying ordinance—so soon the mistress of the property. He had written to this effect to the Earl; and although Kate declared herself unwilling to take part in any discussion, her father agreed with the secretary that it was the proper course.

“What is the use of his coming?” Kate asked petulantly. “We don’t want him bothering here.”

“If you will allow me to say so, my love, I regard it as most right and natural on Mr. Despard’s part to wish to have the approval of the eventual owner in urgent business matters,” replied the Earl; “nay, more, I regard it as a proof of his irreproachable taste and excellent feeling.”

“I am sure he can settle everything quite well without coming here and worrying me. I detest the man, but I’ve no doubt he’s a good enough agent.” And Kate tapped the ground with her foot impatiently, and began to hum, *See the Conquering Hero comes*, a melody which, on reflection, would have struck her as singularly inappropriate.

“I regret to hear, my love, that you detest Mr. Despard, but I agree with you as to his capacity. But however excellent that may be, it is, I repeat, right for these matters to be submitted to you.” The Earl, whose temper had been sorely tried by the visitation of the Pettigrews and the failure of his cherished diplomatic scheme, became almost testy in his manner.

“All right, papa. But you’ll have to do all the talking. I know nothing at all about such things; and if I interfere I shall be letting him fell all the timber, or cut up the estate into small building lots, or take some other sensible and therefore unorthodox step.”

But when George arrived, Lord and Lady Claverley were out driving, and Sapphira was nursing a headache; so that it fell to Kate’s lot to entertain the visitor. Whether she liked it or not, social duties must be performed; so she set about pouring out a cup of tea for Despard with the air of a

Christian martyr prepared to face the tiger with fortitude and resignation. No martyr, she felt, could be expected to meet the advances of the tiger with effusion—a chilling politeness was all that the most exacting animal could expect. Yet when Despard entered the drawing-room she felt her heart beat in an unaccountable manner: it was ridiculous, highly ridiculous, and so she felt it, of her heart to play such pranks; but the fact remained. Nay, more, to her great astonishment, instead of the repulsion and anger she had prepared herself to feel if not to exhibit, she experienced a distinct thrill of pleasure at the sight of his face again. Of course, he was a very disagreeable man; she had settled *that* long ago; of course, he had behaved very badly over the Will, and still more badly in daring to propose to her, and to defy her, and even to speak roughly to her. But, after all, he was a man—a masterful man who was not afraid of her; and he had an honest face—even if at the present moment the said face wore a very reserved, not to say cross, expression. Wherefore Kate, without conscious volition, abandoned the attitude of icy civility she had so carefully prepared, and rose to meet George with a charming smile.

“How do you do, Mr. Despard? I am afraid you have had a cold journey. I hope the dog-cart was in good time at the station. Papa and mamma are out driving, and Sapphira is getting on with a headache she began this morning; so I am all alone. Do sit near the fire, and have a cup of tea.”

“Thank you, Lady Katharine,” replied George, with studied politeness. Kate seemed to have been right as regards the lowness of the temperature, for his manner was positively arctic. Yet calm as was his outward demeanour, George, too, found his heart playing him strange pranks. He was annoyed at being plunged into a *tête-à-tête*; he had hoped that the constraint of meeting Kate again might have been relieved by the presence of others. Yet how rapturously would he have welcomed it, had things only have been different! But he remembered the last scene at Ladyhall, the unworthy suspicions,

the cruel taunts, the open contempt of Kate ; and his heart was filled with bitter resentment, with just indignation. Yet he loved her ; as he looked at her, sitting in a low chair with the fire-light giving to her lovely face a touch of almost unearthly beauty, he longed to take her in his arms, to force her to withdraw those injurious accusations, to win from her a confession of love. The hot blood pulsed strongly through his veins, thrilling him with a passion of adoration. Yet he had to crush it back. His pride forbid him to expose himself to fresh accusations of an interested and pretended love. No, honour would not permit him yet to speak ; but a time would come—ah, would that time ever come ?

Wherefore George expressed polite concern at Sapphira's indisposition, and a confident expectation that the Earl and Countess would enjoy their drive, and trusted that they would not curtail it on his account. He also braced himself to hazard a hope that Lady Katharine had passed a pleasant time at Elnagar ; and then the conversation languished.

If Kate expected Despard to renew his proposals, her hopes or her fears, whichever they were, were mistaken. Probably it was fear which was the predominant feeling—for she felt distinctly relieved when she found that George did not take advantage of their being alone together to renew his suit. But with a woman's subtle instinct, she was not deceived by his civil commonplaces and reserved manner. Stern as he looked, she could detect the love-light in his eye. A woman can never be altogether angry with a man who loves her ; even when impaling him upon her hook, she will use him as though she loved him ; when rejecting him, she will still pity him—and offer to be his sister. Wherefore Kate began to repent her of the bitter words she had used at Ladyhall. She had, indeed, repented immediately after, recognizing how false were her accusations, how mean her innuendoes. But repentance had not then led to amendment of life ; it had simply been remorse. If she had had to do it again, she

would have done it. But now she was prepared to confess her error, and to ask forgiveness from the victim of her temper.

After a long pause Kate took her courage in both hands and began—

“Oh, Mr. Despard, I have so often thought of our last interview.” She paused, and cast an appealing glance at George; he gave her no assistance, but merely replied stiffly—

“Indeed! I, Lady Katharine, have tried to forget it.”

“Oh, please do not misunderstand me. Whenever I have recalled it I have felt ashamed of myself for the things I said to you.”

Kate again stopped, but Despard simply bowed.

“I know I was hard and unjust to you. I know I had no right to say the horrid things about you and the Will.”

“It would perhaps have been better if you had remembered that before you spoke.”

“But I didn’t mean what I said. You will admit that things were very nasty and disagreeable to me just then, or I should never have spoken as I did,” pleaded Kate.

“Really, Lady Katharine,” replied Despard, with studied coolness, “you are making a great deal of a very small matter. I have lived too long in this wicked world to attach much importance to what is said by a woman in a temper.”

Kate started. The man had no feelings; here she was, as he could very well see, doing her best to apologize for her conduct, and he treated her with open contempt. Still she made one more effort.

“Please do not be so ungenerous and unforgiving, Mr. Despard. I do so want to say that I am sorry. Why can’t you forgive me, and let us be friends?”

“Friends,” cried Despard, with a short laugh. “No, Lady Katharine, we need not be enemies certainly; but friends we can hardly be. And pray do not think that any apology is necessary. You have every right to form whatever opinion you please of me. I admit that it is not very pleasant to be

regarded as a knave ; but, after all, it matters very little. A few more weeks, and I shall pass out of your life altogether. Meanwhile, I will endeavour to make any business interviews which may be necessary as little unpleasant as possible."

After this any further attempt at reconciliation became impossible. Kate felt, and rightly felt, that she had honestly endeavoured to make the *amende honorable*, and had been snubbed for her pains.

"As you will, Mr. Despard. I have done my best to assure you that I regret what passed ; but if you insist on being disagreeable and unkind and unforgiving, I cannot help it. I can only say that I am sorry to have troubled you by referring to it at all."

What George might have said in reply is doubtful, for at this moment the Earl and Countess came in from their drive, and conversation became general. Sapphira's headache having become more tractable, she appeared at the dinner-table ; so the two young people had no further chance of talking together that evening.

The next morning was occupied with the business matters which had caused Despard's arrival ; and after lunch he departed by the afternoon train for London, whither the affairs of the estate called him.

As he travelled up to town, George went over in his mind the proceedings of the previous afternoon ; and as he meditated thereon his conscience smote him—and his conscience acted very properly in so doing, as he frankly admitted to himself. The girl who had so grievously wounded him, who had been so unjust to him, who had attributed such unworthy motives to his actions, had confessed the error of her ways ; and had, as he acknowledged to himself, humbled herself before him ; while he—in his pride and resentment—had refused the olive branch thus offered to him, had been hard and unforgiving, nay, rude. Just as Kate at Ladyhall had reproached herself for her treatment of George, so now George reproached him-

self for his treatment of Kate. He wished it could all happen over again—he would behave so differently. He saw now that he might have accepted Kate's overtures with courtesy, and have granted her the forgiveness she asked, without in any way compromising himself. But it was too late. How often do we lament our actions—still more our words—too late! At the time what we did or said seemed the only thing possible. Now too late, we discover that it was just the wrong thing—and all because we were thinking solely of ourselves, nothing of the other person. Wherefore George had, and deservedly had, a most unpleasant period of reflection, as the train passed through the pleasant midland vales on his way to the great city. It was all over, he said to himself; he had had his chance and lost it—and all through temper and pride. Pride, kept within due bounds, may be a respectable vice, nay, even a virtue; but when it leads a man, in homely phrase, to cut off his nose to spite his face, it may justly be termed the vice of fools. George Despard was a fool, and he knew it. But this knowledge of himself, though salutary, was not consoling.

And Kate? Kate was no happier than George. She had humbled herself before him, and had been spurned. She bitterly repented having exposed herself to this humiliation. Here she was wrong. She had done the right thing, even if she had suffered in so doing; and the fact that other people have not learnt their parts, and so do not give us the right cues, in no way excuses us from trying our best to be word-perfect in the drama of life. But Kate was unable to wrap herself in her own consciousness of rectitude. Her feelings of resentment against George were deeper than before; and who shall blame her for this? Yet amid all her bitterness of soul, amid all her anger against him, she was astonished to find that she still cherished in her heart a certain feeling of admiration for the man who—however ungraciously—had refused to be trampled upon by her pretty feet.



## CHAPTER XX

### AUBREY LESTRANGE

IT was a lovely December day. There had been a fog the preceding night accompanied by a hard frost. The leafless branches of the fine old trees in Claverley Park were covered with thick hoar-frost, and surely never do trees look so magically beautiful as when decked in glistening white. There had been no snow, and the ground was hard as iron, while the chill wintry sun filled the air with brightness if not with warmth. An ideal day for a walk, the brisk, cold air sending the blood pulsing through the veins and bringing a glow to the cheek. So thought Sapphira Lestrangle, as she walked quickly through the park, on an errand of mercy. It may at once be said that the inspirer of the mission was not herself. She was but a ministering angel—a messenger carrying out the charitable designs of the Countess. On this occasion she was bound on a voyage of discovery—the precise object of her researches being the exact financial position of one of my lady's pet pensioners, together with a personal inspection of the state of the modest larder and coal-cellar of the said pensioner's cottage. This was a mission for which Miss Lestrangle had no disinclination. She liked to play my Lady Bountiful, even by proxy; and it was an amusement to her to listen to the tales of woe, which with much garrulity and more embellishment were detailed for her delectation. Not that she was hard-hearted—by no means; when she met with genuine distress and undoubted poverty she was only too glad to assist in relieving it. Being herself not unacquainted with misfortune, she had learnt to sympathise with those in trouble. She sometimes had a bitter feeling at heart in that she was

simply the minister of another's charity. But still, with all her faults, she had a fellow-feeling with misfortune, and often a kind word from her was a distinct addition to the more external relief of which it was simply the accompaniment.

Sapphira stepped briskly along. The beauty of the day and the sharp frosty air alike pleased her, and she felt far more at peace and charity with her fellows than was frequently the case. She had forgotten for the time being her dependent position; and her grievances against the world at large, and the relations who were her kindly benefactors in particular, had given way to the pure joy of existence in this fair world. More than this, of late she had insensibly altered; she had a more kindly feeling even to the aristocratic dwellers in Claverley Castle. The Earl had confided to her his anxieties for his daughter's marriage, and his dire forebodings as to the future. The Countess had likewise confided in her, and begged her to use what influence she possessed in a similar direction; nay, more, Kate herself—who of the three was the only one who could fairly be said ever to have treated Sapphira without consideration, and that through thoughtlessness rather than intention—Kate had of late shown herself unusually gentle and forbearing. In little things, where formerly she was petulant and often peremptory, she now displayed a consideration which was entirely foreign to the old Kate. Despite her frequent rebellious thoughts, despite her stubborn fight against the realities and responsibilities of life, Kate was changed, and changed for the better. Sapphira still hated her; but she had honestly to confess that her feelings of ill-will had far less justification than heretofore. So it was with a light heart that Sapphira passed through the park gates and turned down the country road.

She had not gone very far when she heard a voice say, "Can you tell me if the Earl of Claverley is at home? I notice that you have just come out of the Castle grounds."

Something in the tone startled her, and she looked with a curious mixture of expectation and dread in the direction

from which the voice came. It was from a man seated on a stile—a man some sixty years of age, but possessing the remains of striking beauty. His hair, originally a ruddy brown, although heavily streaked with white was still abundant, and was worn long, after the fashion of an artist. He had a straight nose; his mouth and chin were concealed by a thick moustache and a close-cut, pointed beard. His eyes were singularly fine; but the face, despite its beauty, repelled as much as it attracted. Its artistic refinement contrasted strangely with a look of cunning craftiness. The man was tall and vigorous; there was no appearance of excess or riotous living about him. At a first glance one might exclaim, "What a handsome man!" But a second look would induce a cautious observer carefully if metaphorically to button up his pockets.

But Sapphira had no such thoughts as she gazed spellbound. Her heart seemed to stop, and her tongue refused to speak.

"Come, come," cried the man impatiently, "a civil question deserves a civil answer." And he got up from the stile, and slowly walked towards her.

Then Sapphira, with a strong effort, found her voice.

"Father," she cried, and rushed into his arms.

"By Heaven, it's little Sapphira!" cried Aubrey Lestrangle. "Why, I should never have known you! You don't favour your father, my girl—though you have your mother's eyes."

"Oh, father, father, then you are not dead after all! I have mourned for you so much, darling father. I thought I should never see you again. Why did you not write to me? Where have you been all these years? Where did you come from?"

"Where have I been? Where do I come from? Why, like the devil, from going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it."

Mr. Lestrangle spake truly: he *had* been a great traveller: and pilgrims with whom he had consorted would never for a moment have disputed the accuracy of his comparison.

"But, father, why did you never write to me? Why did you leave Rio? It is all mystery to me. When no letters

came from you, uncle Claverley made every inquiry, but you had disappeared ; and at last uncle said you must be dead. I cannot understand it."

But Mr. Lestrangle had no intention of enlightening his daughter on these points, natural as he admitted her curiosity to be. It was by no means to his advantage for Sapphira to be acquainted with either his manner of life, or the divers spots where he had found rest for the sole of his foot. There are certain dark places on this earth which the most lax parent would hesitate to describe to his child ; and there are occupations which the most brazen would fain keep concealed.

"I daresay you can't understand, my love," he said lightly, "there are in this life many things hard to be understood, as the man said in the gospel."

Among other habits, Lestrangle had a habit of introducing into his conversation quotations, biblical and other ; and as evidenced above he was not always very accurate in placing the extracts. Then, seeing that his daughter was by no means satisfied by this airy way of settling the matter, he went on somewhat sternly—

"Look here, my girl, you have spoken of mystery. Understand once for all that it's no use your trying to pry into the past. What has happened has happened. I have no intention of making any explanation to you or to anyone else. The man—or the woman for that matter—who troubles himself over the past is a fool. The future is the only thing worth considering. So just remember, no more questions. Do you hear?"

"Oh, father, don't be so stern with me ! It is only natural that I should be eager to know all about you."

"Natural enough, I daresay. But you must put a curb on your curiosity. So there's an end of it."

"I'll do anything you like, father ; I am so glad to see you again. You cannot think how I've missed you, and thought of you, and longed for you."

Mr. Lestrangle shrugged his shoulders impatiently : he had had enough sentiment in his dealings with his late lamented

wife, and was by no means anxious to renew the same with his daughter.

“Yes, yes, my love : that’s very nice and dutiful and flattering, and all that. But, as I said, we must think of the future : more especially as the present isn’t altogether a subject of profound joy or congratulation.”

“Not a time of joy, when I’ve got my darling father back ? Oh, father, father !” cried Sapphira reproachfully.

“That’s all very well so far as you are concerned. But women are so selfish. I was thinking of my own position. I’ve got the clothes I stand in, which, as you will perceive, are not such as would pass without reproach in the Row. I have in my pocket exactly one pound seven shillings and fivepence halfpenny—and no prospects.”

When her father made this statement with cynical plainness Sapphira started backward, and for the first time gazed intently on his appearance. So far as the outward man was concerned, he had spoken truly. His costume would not have passed muster in Hyde Park at Church Parade. He was dressed with a certain artistic smartness : but his brown velvet coat and waistcoat were much the worse for wear : the soft felt hat which covered his splendid head was stained and greasy : his boots—the surest sign of adversity—displayed more than one crack. To speak the truth, he was horribly shabby.

Sapphira was shocked at the sight—still more shocked at his words : though, if she had considered the matter, the chances are that a parent, who has vanished for some fifteen years and then turns up again, will be impecunious. He *may* be a millionaire, of course, but it is long odds the other way.

“Oh ! father,” Sapphira cried, as she again rushed into his arms, “are you in want ? Take my purse ; there’s not much in it, I’m afraid, but take it, father, take it. It will be something for the present. And I’ll work——”

“No, no, my girl ; I’ve not fallen quite so low as that. I’ll not sponge on you—not at present, at least,” he added beneath his breath. “It’s your uncle I must see ; and that

brings me back to the question I asked a charming young lady I met a few minutes back, whom I little thought to be my beloved daughter. Is the Earl at the Castle?"

"Yes, uncle is at home," replied Sapphira doubtfully, as she looked again at her father's dress. She could not help asking herself what the courtly Earl, so punctilious in his own attire, would think of his brother-in-law. Yet, after all, the latter's handsome face and superb bearing would carry him through. Sapphira, in her love and her joy, did not see the craftiness which, to an unprejudiced observer, marred his looks. "He is at home," she repeated, and then went on dolorously, "but I'm afraid he won't be able to help you much. Things are in a bad way at the Castle; at least, uncle says they are. Of course, such people don't know what real poverty is, as I do." And Sapphira went back in her memory to the old days of penury when she lived with her father, after her mother's death.

"Pooh, pooh!" cried Lestrangle, "he'll have to lend me a helping hand—and a helping hand with something inside it. Am I not his sister's husband? Besides, things can't be very bad. Haven't I seen that godmother MacBalloch has popped off, and left everything to Kate Claverley?"

"That is true—at least, partly true; for there is a condition. Kate has to marry within six months of Mrs. MacBalloch's death. Three months are already gone—and she's not married yet, and there seems little likelihood of it."

"Ah! that's only a silly girl's nonsense. Of course she'll marry; she'll never be such a fool as to throw away a property like that. It's a pity I'm her uncle, or I'd marry the girl myself." And he drew himself up with a splendid gesture that saved the speech from coxcombry. Sapphira gazed with fond admiration at her handsome parent.

"But that's neither here nor there," he went on; "still something may come out of this. The property will want looking after? Why shouldn't I be the one to do that? Such a post would just suit me."

"There's no chance of that. There's a horrid secretary,

a connection of Mrs. MacBalloch's, who has done all the business for years."

"What is his name?"

"George Despard; and, by the way, if Kate doesn't marry, he will come into the property—or rather into part of it."

"I must look into this matter," said Lestrangle thoughtfully, "there may be money to be made. Yes, I'll look up the defunct lady's Will, and see how things stand. But first I must see your uncle. So we'll go on to the Castle."

Although it was so many years since they had met, they did not exchange many words on their way to the Castle. Lestrangle had a silent fit on; the information just received from his daughter had greatly interested him, and set his keen wits to work. How could this curious state of affairs be turned to his advantage? A hundred ideas suggested themselves to that busy brain of his, and his quick intellect was rapidly weaving scheme after scheme which might, or might not, eventually become feasible. Sapphira, too, was silent; she would dearly have loved, it is true, to hear of all that had happened to her father during the years they had been separated, to have sung pæans of praise on account of his unlooked-for reappearance, to have given utterance to glad anticipations of happy days in the future. But to her surprise she found herself not a little afraid of her handsome father, with his bold look and, as it seemed to her, his gallant bearing. Naturally, she missed the touch of furtiveness, apparent enough to an unprejudiced observer, which changed the bold air into a swagger. She was also anxious as to the reception which the Earl would give to his unexpected guest. Kind as her uncle had always shown himself, she knew how fastidious he was; and she had a shrewd suspicion that the reappearance of his brother-in-law, in seedy attire and indigent circumstances, would be by no means pleasing to her uncle—especially at this juncture.

Just as they reached the Castle, Aubrey broke silence: "Now, my girl, remember what I told you; no questions as

to the past; no inquisitiveness as to the future. I will manage your uncle Claverley. All you have to do is to hold your tongue. Do you understand?" And he looked steadily at her with a sternness which added not a little to her fears.

"Yes, father," she meekly replied.

"Is his lordship in?" she asked the butler as they entered.

The stately Perkins lost not a little of his stateliness as he gazed with astonishment at Miss Lestrangle's picturesque but shabby companion.

"Yes, miss," he replied at last somewhat limply; "oh, yes, miss, his lordship is in. He is, as a matter of fact, in the library, miss. But who, if I may make so bold——?"

"There, there, my man, that will do," interrupted Lestrangle impatiently. "Show me into the library at once."

"But his lordship is very busy, and gave orders that he was not to be disturbed."

"Oh, he'll see me fast enough! Show the way, my man—never mind names."

Perkins looked deprecatingly at Sapphira.

"Yes, Perkins, it will be all right; Lord Claverley will not blame you."

Perkins metaphorically shrugged his shoulders; and with the air of a Christian martyr, who combines resignation and misfortune with the forgiveness of injurious treatment, ushered them into Lord Claverley's presence.

He then retired and relieved his feelings in friendly colloquy and familiar confidences with the faithful but destructive Charles.

"I wonder who on earth that 'ere bounder is as Miss Sapphira has taken to see his lordship. A 'andsome enough fellow, with an eye like an 'awk; but, 'ang me if he don't look like a purfeshnal sharper, Charles, my lad! And 'ow comes Miss Lestrangle to be along of 'im? She's a sly one is Miss Lestrangle, you mark my words, Charles!"

Charles was not a gifted conversationalist, so he contented himself with gravely shaking his head and breaking a break-



fast-cup which he happened to be washing up at the time, thereby expressing his profound concurrence with the sentiments expressed by his superior officer.

Lord Claverley was engrossed in a letter from his agent, which deepened the furrows that lined his benevolent forehead, when his privacy was thus rudely invaded. The letter had disturbed his temper not a little, and the interruption did not act at all as a sedative.

"I thought you knew, Sapphira," he began snappishly, "that I hate being disturbed." Then he caught sight of Lestrangle. "Good heavens! whom have we here?"

"You never expected to see me again, now did you, Claverley?" said Aubrey, coming forward with outstretched hand.

"Aubrey Lestrangle!" cried the Earl, sinking back in his armchair.

"Yes, Aubrey Lestrangle, and no mistake. A somewhat seedy Aubrey Lestrangle, a remarkably poor Aubrey—but Aubrey himself, my dear brother-in-law!"

The Earl gasped, but could make no articulate sound. Speech failed him. He felt he was hardly treated by fate. He had borne like a man (so he told himself) the decay of his estate—the irritating Will of Mrs. MacBalloch—yea, even the obduracy of his dear daughter; and now, as a crowning misfortune, this most undesirable relation, whom he had fondly imagined was dead and no longer an object of uneasiness, reappeared with all the old possibilities of worry, anxiety, trouble and impecuniosity! Yes, fate was hard on him.

These feelings were very clearly expressed on his face, and were easily interpreted by Lestrangle; a good deal of it was evident even to Sapphira.

"Oh, uncle," she began tremulously, "he—father—has come to life again; be kind to him, as you have always been kind to me."

"Sapphira, leave the room," cried her father sharply, "your uncle and I will talk alone."

Then the Earl, with a great effort, forced himself to speak.

"Yes, my dear," he said kindly, "you had better leave us. We shall have much to say."

Sapphira, with an appealing look at her uncle, went away to her own room. She felt rather sick at heart, and filled with vague forebodings. She avoided seeing Lady Claverley and Kate, longing to be alone, so that she might think over the mysterious reappearance of her father, and the still further mystery connected with his long absence and silence.

Meanwhile, the Earl had pulled himself together.

"My good Aubrey," he began, "you will forgive my not altogether unnatural astonishment at the very unexpected visit with which you are honouring me. So many years have elapsed since I last had the pleasure of either seeing you or hearing from you, that I had reluctantly come to the sad conclusion—you will pardon me?—that you were no longer living."

"Sad conclusion!" sneered Lestrangle; "very sad, no doubt! Don't be a hypocrite, Claverley; say straight out that you hoped that I was dead and buried, and that you were rid of a most undesirable connection."

"You will excuse me," said the Earl, with an offended air; "I should never think of expressing myself in terms of such indelicate coarseness."

"No, but you thought it, all the same. Look here, Claverley, it's no use beating about the bush. Fifteen years have made a good bit of change in me. When I married your sister, I daresay she thought me a very fine fellow, with plenty of grand and poetic thoughts, and romance enough to satisfy the most imaginative and sentimental of women—which she undoubtedly was. And I daresay there was some truth in it. But my fine thoughts and poetic ideas didn't mean money, as your purse knew very well!"

The Earl acquiesced in this remark with a prolonged shake of the head and a sympathetic spreading forth of his shapely hands.

"Yes, I see you remember," and Mr. Lestrangle smiled

grimly. "However, you were kind to me, and eventually obtained for me that appointment abroad."

"That is so, my dear sir, that is so. But you will excuse me if I venture to ask, why did you throw it up? It was not of as lucrative a nature as I could have wished; still, it was sufficient for your modest wants—quite sufficient."

Lestrangle's face grew dark.

"You'd perhaps better not ask too many questions, Claverley. The answers might not be altogether pleasing. It's enough if I say that my wants were not modest, and in trying to supplement them things happened which made my disappearance desirable. So I disappeared."

The Earl was frightened by these hints; and his anxiety was apparent in his troubled expression.

"Oh! you needn't worry," went on Aubrey, "I'm not going to make you my father-confessor. I've knocked about the world for the last fifteen years, and done plenty of things that your sensitive conscience would blame."

"But, Aubrey, you're not—there's nothing—I mean," stammered the Earl, "you've done nothing that the law——"

The Earl stopped. It is a difficult matter to ask your brother-in-law in so many words if he is a criminal; and so Lord Claverley felt it.

Lestrangle burst into a harsh laugh.

"I may as well frighten the old boy, without letting him know too much," he thought.

"So you think you are entertaining a burglar unawares, are you, Claverley?" he said aloud. "Well, well, commend me to the British aristocracy for thinking evil of their friends. Never mind what I've done. I've made no bones about telling you that my record, if published, wouldn't be at all creditable to your house. So the question comes, what are you going to do for me?"

This was a home question; and although the Earl had been anticipating it ever since his redoubtable brother-in-law entered the room, it is hardly to be wondered at if he was

not altogether prepared with his answer. It is all very well to kill the fatted calf when the returned prodigal is a son or a brother ; but when the prodigal happens to be a brother-in-law, especially when he evinces no vestige of that recognition of the errors of his ways which becomes a home-coming sinner, the necessity for the slaughter of the pampered animal does not seem so obvious. This particular dish is usually reserved for the next of kin, and is rarely expended upon collaterals. The Earl felt this strongly, and endeavoured to put it into words which should be firm and yet not provocative of wrath.

“It would perhaps, my dear sir, be more becoming if you were to reflect on what I had done for you, rather than to suggest fresh exertions on my part in your favour.” The Earl flattered himself that this was an excellent and convincing remark. He proceeded, gathering strength as he went on: “You will do me the favour to recall the fact, that when I, at great personal inconvenience and paying scant attention to the claims of my dear daughter, discharged your debts and obtained an excellent post for you abroad, you bound yourself never to ask any fresh assistance from me. I do not like to seem to be sounding my own praises”—the Earl spread forth his hands in a deprecating manner—“but you will do me the justice to admit that I have recognized the natural claim of my sister upon my sympathy and help by adopting her daughter ; and I really cannot allow that there is any moral or legal justification for you to come to me and ask what I am going to do for you. I am surprised at a person of your quick intelligence falling into such an error. You must anticipate my answer, without giving me the pain of putting it into blunt words.”

It was a good speech ; more than that, it was unanswerable. The Earl *had* treated his sister's husband with great forbearance, with great generosity. Yet the man only laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh, and foreboded no good to Lord Claverley's peace of mind.

“That's all true enough, old boy”—the Earl started at this

familiarity, as if he had been struck—"true enough—now don't get angry, that won't help you in the least. I've no claim on you, as you say, but you may as well face facts. Here I am, penniless. 'I could a tale unfold,' as the fellow says in the play; but I spare your ears. What I've done in the past doesn't matter; but what I do in the future does. And it won't be pleasant for the Earl of Claverley to read in the papers that such and such a thing has happened to his brother-in-law. We won't put the thing into language which may hurt your delicate susceptibilities; but you may be sure of this, if anything *does* happen to me, I shall have no particular desire to deny my connection with your noble house. So unless you want to avoid a scandal, we had better come to terms."

The Earl was smitten with terror by this threat. Why, why had this misguided connection of his come back to trouble him? Lord Claverley was not a vindictive man, but he could have heard with the most complete satisfaction a life-sentence pronounced upon this hardened sinner—provided his own name did not suffer by the scandal. But the family name!—no, that could not be sacrificed. The honour of the Clares must be saved at any cost. It must not be compromised by this handsome scamp, who had not even the merit of being one of the sacred house. Yet how could he do it? Where was the money to come from?

"Hush, hush," he cried, "don't speak so loud, Aubrey. You would never bring discredit upon the family name; your love for your dead wife would forbid it!"

"A fig for the family name," replied Aubrey, with brutal frankness. "I care not a straw for all the Clares who ever lived. Come, Claverley, I respect your scruples and all that. No man likes parting with his cash. But it's got to be done, and it won't be any the pleasanter for postponement."

"But I haven't got the money," cried the Earl in despair; "you don't know what has happened during the time you have been——" the Earl paused.

"In retirement, let us say," put in Lestrangle, with a grin.

The Earl bowed. "In retirement; so be it," he said gravely. "But if you, as I gather, have not met with much good fortune, things have not been altogether prosperous with me. Falling rents, and unfortunate, perhaps unwise, investments have greatly depleted my income. It is most questionable whether I shall be able to go on without letting the Castle. Literally, my dear sir, I have no money to spare, no money to spare."

"You seem still able to maintain a butler and a footman or two, unless my eyes deceive me," said Lestrangle brutally, "so there still must be a shot or two in the locker. If worst comes to worst, you can dispense with their valuable services. I am told maids are cheaper, and they are certainly much more efficient."

The Earl was horror-stricken at the bare suggestion, and argued the point with some skill. But Lestrangle's pertinent and cynical frankness carried the day. Sooner than face the exposure which Aubrey threatened—though of what it was he had to fear, he had but the vaguest idea—the Earl succumbed under pressure, and agreed to make an allowance of ten pounds a month to his impecunious relation. Aubrey, finding that this was as much as he could manage to extract, accepted it as a stepping-stone whereon he intended to rise to higher, that is to say, more lucrative things.

"I see," he remarked genially, "that you are yearning to ask me to stay for lunch; but I'll save you the trouble. I'll just step through this French window. Say good bye to my daughter for me. Give her a kiss, and say she shall hear shortly from her loving father. Bye-bye."

And, kissing his hand, he disappeared through the window, leaving the Earl lying a limp object, in his armchair; feeling, as Mr. Mantalini describes it, as if he were a dem'd unpleasant body, and wondering whether it was not, after all, a horrid dream, the ghastly outcome of a too vivid imagination.

## CHAPTER XXI

### A PHILOSOPHIC WOOING

AFTER the departure of Aubrey Lestrangle, Lord Claverley remained for some time almost in a state of collapse. But, unpleasant as the interview had been in itself, terrifying as were the prospects of future trouble which it foreshadowed, and calamitous as had been its final result, still the Earl in time remembered that the world—whereby he meant his wife and the butler—must be faced sooner or later. Wherefore by a great effort he pulled himself together, rang the bell, and sent for Sapphira.

If Lord Claverley had passed a disagreeable half-hour, his niece had been by no means more favoured by fate. She had been filled with an agony of apprehension, and the time of waiting and suspense had been almost more than she could bear. She came, therefore, at her uncle's bidding, trembling and anxious and full of foreboding. Nor was the Earl's countenance such as would allay her apprehension. She was well accustomed to her uncle's habit of treating the small ills of life as full-blown tragedies; but on this occasion she saw that he was seriously discomposed, that it was no trivial circumstance which was disturbing him.

"Oh, uncle, uncle, what is the matter?" she cried, running to him, "and what have you done with father?"

"Your father, Sapphira, has gone—has gone as suddenly as he came. I do not wish to hurt your feelings, my dear, but it is needful for me to say that I am seriously displeased with him. I cannot enter into details, but his conduct has

been such as to merit my strong disapproval. There, there, my dear," the Earl went on kindly, patting her on the head, "it is no fault of yours. I am not angry with you."

"But, uncle," cried the weeping Sapphira, "do tell me what it is. He is my father, whatever he has done; and if you only were to tell me, perhaps it might be explained."

"I am sorry, my dear, but it is impossible for me to tell you any more." The Earl was right; it would have puzzled him to speak of the misdeeds of the reprobate Aubrey, unless it were the crowning act of villainy in extorting from him a modest allowance. "Let his name never more be mentioned between us," he went on. "I shall, of course, have to speak to your aunt, though I would gladly have spared her; but as your father was seen by the servants, it would be impossible to keep his visit a secret."

The Earl paused, while Sapphira continued her convulsive sobs.

"There is one thing more, Sapphira. I am reluctant to say it, but it must be done. I shall, of course, wish for you to continue to live with us, as if this unhappy visit had never taken place. But I desire you clearly to understand that I forbid you to hold any communication with your unfortunate father, who has proved unworthy of the confidence a child would naturally place in a parent."

The Earl said this with some solemnity, even sternness; then he softened, and again became a man and an uncle.

"Come, come, my dear, you must not give way. Your sorrow is no doubt natural. I am not angry with you, my dear, and I will do my best to stand to you *in loco parentis*."

And the Earl stalked from the room, and went straight to my lady's boudoir, in order to make to her a full and complete confession of the sins of Aubrey LeStrange.

She heard him to the end of his story; then she said—

"I can't think why you didn't say you were not at home."

"I did, Henrietta. I had already given orders to Perkins



to that effect. But it is so difficult to prove that you are not at home when the unwelcome visitor is already in your presence. It is impossible for a man of fourteen stone to explain himself away as if he were an ecclesiastical dogma—quite impossible, my love.”

“*I could have done it.*”

“Doubtless, my love; but unfortunately you were not there.”

“And you actually went so far as to promise him an allowance?”

“I was compelled to do so, Henrietta, in order to get rid of him.” The Earl felt that now they were on thin ice, and trembled accordingly.

“It is absurd to give money to people in order to get rid of them, as I’ve always told Perkins with regard to organ-grinders; they may go away then, but they always come again that day week. The oftener they come again, the oftener they can earn money by being sent away, and you’ll find it will be exactly the same with Aubrey. How much did you say you had promised him?”

Lord Claverley had pointedly refrained from mentioning the sum in the hope that his wife would not ask what it was. After more than thirty years of married life he might have known better.

“Ten pounds a month, Henrietta; I do not see how I could well have offered him less.”

“You could; you could have offered him nothing, and that would have been a hundred and twenty pounds a year less. *I should have done so in your place.*”

“But you are not always in my place,” replied Lord Claverley somewhat testily.

“No, but I generally am, and that saves a great deal of trouble and expense that we should otherwise be let in for.”

“In this case, however, I am the best judge, and I felt it a debt which I owed to my conscience to do the best I could for poor Arabella’s husband.”

"Then I only hope your conscience will give you a receipt in order to prevent your paying the debt over again in some other form to some other person," replied the Countess drily. Wives—even excellent wives—have rarely much respect for their husbands' consciences; they regard them very much in the same light as they regard their daughters' dolls, namely, as harmless and inoffensive playthings.

Lord Claverley's face grew long. He was always utterly wretched when his wife disapproved of him. "I wish we could always see eye to eye in these little matters, Henrietta," he said rather wistfully.

"So we could, my love," she replied in her cheery voice, "if only you would always be guided by me."

Lady Claverley was the type of woman who was delighted when her husband agreed with her, and amiable when he did not; but that she should ever agree with him, was a possibility which never entered into her calculations.

It is one thing to forbid a girl to pursue a certain line of conduct; it is another thing to enforce the order. A wise man never forbids that which he is powerless to prevent. The Earl should have remembered this when he issued his commands to Sapphira to hold no communication with her erring sire. She was grateful in her way to her uncle for his past kindness; still she had always regarded his adoption of her as done grudgingly and of necessity; and her gratitude, if sincere, was not deep, and was largely adulterated with envy of her cousin's happier lot. The blessedness is not the only part of giving which seems larger to the giver than to the receiver: the gift itself, as well as the gratitude which it ought to evoke, has very different dimensions when seen from the two opposite points of view. After all, Aubrey was her father, and in her case absence had cast a halo of romantic sentiment over him. It is not strange that she was fascinated by his artistic posturing, and handsome, dare-devil face, and that she failed, clear-eyed as she usually was, to see through the false glitter of

both his speech and bearing. Wherefore it came to pass that when a letter from Aubrey arrived, it was duly answered; when a secret interview was arranged, it was duly kept. As a result, Aubrey completely regained all his old influence over his daughter. She was absolutely subjugated by the glamour of his presence, and his easy assumption of parental authority. She became his slave. He so mesmerized her, that, where he was concerned, she became absolutely without volition—a living automaton. This was precisely what Aubrey wanted; and he arranged that Sapphira should write to him regularly, reporting all that went on at the Castle—who came, who went: most especially everything Kate said or did. Sapphira was to use all her influence over Kate to prevent the latter from marrying. She could not understand this: it seemed to her that if her cousin married and thus secured Mrs. MacBalloch's fortune, the financial position at the Castle would be such that an adequate allowance to her father could easily be arranged. But Aubrey kept his own counsel: what his plans were he himself knew, and was indisposed to take his daughter into his confidence. All she had to do was to carry out his instructions. This Sapphira did; and if she thought at all in the matter, it was to come to the disquieting conclusion that her father had done something very wicked—which even her uncle, good easy man, could not pardon.

As for Lady Kate, she also was out of spirits just then. She had not yet got over the shock of her godmother's death and all the surprises and changes which it entailed. Her character was ripening and developing fast; and there are growing-pains of the soul as well as of the body. Moreover, for the first time in her life, she was torn between two conflicting desires—the wish to save her beloved old home from the hammer of the auctioneer, and the shrinking from and distaste for a loveless marriage as the only means to this end. She did not know what ailed her; all she knew was that the old, irresponsible, careless life was over, and that a strange and feverish unrest had come in its place.

Had she been made of the same material as most girls of her time, she would have endeavoured to discover the reason of her malady, and would persistently have taken her feelings out of their case and examined them, until the reasons for all their vagaries were clear to her. But she was formed of different elements; and was as innocent as were her grandmothers of that egotism which was the distinguishing sign of her day and generation.

It is a fact worthy of some notice that people with a long line of ancestry are rarely, if ever, egotistical. Selfish they may be, and perhaps sometimes are; but egotism is a characteristic of new families and new nations. It may be that the old families, like the old nationalities, have too little exuberant vitality to be egotistic, egotism being a compound of intense individualism allied with dramatic power. It may be that the self-absorption and certainty of sympathy which is at the root of this quality belongs to youth rather than to age. Whatever the reason may be, the fact remains. Egotism is not of necessity a fault: when kept in its proper place and united to sufficient dramatic force, it frequently amounts to a positive charm. But it must never be allowed to develop into selfishness; to which, indeed, it is not closely allied. Often the most egotistical people are the least selfish, and *vice versâ*. Egotism is more attractive in women than in men—as are, indeed, most of the characteristics of a new race, the attributes of noble birth being, as a rule, far more beneficial, from an ethical point of view, to a man's character than to a woman's. The stability which is so restful in the well-born man is sometimes a little dull in the well-born woman; while the vivacity which is so charming in the woman of new families sometimes borders on vulgarity in the men of those houses.

Now Orlando Pratt possessed all the charms—as well as all the disadvantages—of the self-made individualist: Lady Kate was innocent of either. That is perhaps the reason why, in spite of her hatred of his sex, the man attracted her. For he

*had* attracted her, and attracted so much that she had talked about him considerably to her father and mother; with the result that, after much consultation by letter as to his character and prospects between Lady Claverley and Lady Dunbar, Orlando Pratt had been invited to Claverley.

"Tiffy, I am weary of my life," said Kate to her old nurse, the very day before his arrival.

"Never mind, my lammie. Misannie used to feel just such another after eating shell-fish; but it passed off in a day or two, as yours will, never fear."

"But it hasn't passed off, Tiffy dear, and I've felt like it for much more than a day or two. I don't believe I shall ever be happy again. I feel as if somehow my mainspring had got broken, and that no amount of winding-up would be any longer of any use."

"You are the very *appliqué* of Mastrenery when he first took to smoking. You've no idea how bad the poor young gentleman seemed—and looked: more like an undertaker than an undergraduate, as many a time I've told him; but he got quite used to it in time—in fact seemed rather to enjoy it than not, as doubtless you will, my lady."

"But I don't, Tiffy; I get wretcheder and wretcheder every day. Nothing has ever been the same since Mrs. MacBalloch's Will was read, with its horrid condition that I must get married within six months, or else lose the fortune which alone will enable us to keep dear old Claverley. People have no right to make Wills like that!"

"They haven't, lovey—no right at all; and they oughtn't to be allowed to do it. When people get to the diseased Mrs. MacBalloch's delicate state they should let other folks do all their business for them. I remember when Misteropkins was suffering from confirmed old age and chronic new-ritis—him being about twenty years older than Missisopkins and married before to the relic of the late Dr. Simpkins, of Clapton—she was given what they called a power of a turnkey to sign all his

cheques and make all his Wills for him: and a world of trouble it saved."

"It must have done," said Kate absently.

"Well, then, my lady, something of that kind ought to have been done in the case of Mrs. MacBalloch to prevent her from making a Will which there was no way out of, as you may say."

"I don't think that would have helped much, for then that hateful secretary would have had the making of the Will, and he would have taken care to pocket everything himself without giving me even the off-chance of it."

"Oh! don't say that, my lady. Mr. Despard may not be an ideal beau of a man, but I do believe he is as honest as the day."

"Then why doesn't he behave as if he were?"

"Well, my lammie, as Shakespeare says, even if you are as poor as mice you cannot escape calomel; and I stick up for Mr. Despard, however much appearances may be against him."

"You see, Tiffy, it is so horrid to feel you have to get married, whether you want to or not!"

"It is, lovey. To my mind marriage ought to be volunteery or not at all; as I told Misannie when she fell in love with the adjunct of the militia regiment, and her papa wanted her to marry the town clerk."

Kate strolled languidly out of the old nursery. "Perhaps Mr. Pratt will make things better," she said to herself; "at any rate he will be a change; and he always sets one thinking and makes life look more interesting than it usually does."

The following day Orlando arrived in full force, and was duly introduced by Kate to her father and mother. Lord Claverley was greatly taken with him—as he invariably was with strangers; but her ladyship reserved her opinion. Katharine was again conscious of his fascination; and he once more succeeded in rousing her out of her lethargy and depression.

"This tea is most delicious—most aromatic," he remarked, as he sat in front of the huge hall fire, delicately stirring his cup; "yet its flavour puzzles me. I consider myself somewhat of a connoisseur in teas; yet I cannot be sure whether this comes from India or China, its flavour is so subtle—so elusive."

Lord Claverley purred with that satisfaction to which human nature is always prone when its food is openly praised.

"I am delighted that you like it, my dear Mr. Pratt—delighted, I am sure. I do not exactly know whether it came from India or from China, but doubtless my lady can inform us." And he turned to his wife with a gesture half playful and half courtly.

"It came from the Stores," she replied. And her husband knew that the conversation was ended.

Orlando looked at her for a moment through his half-closed eyelids; and decided that it would be far easier to creep up Lord Claverley's sleeve than up her ladyship's. He also made a note of the fact that Lady Claverley was still a very handsome woman.

"I think," he remarked, as pleasantly as if he had never been snubbed in his life, "that taste is the sense which we least cultivate. I have a theory that taste might be treated as scientifically as colour or music. As there are primary colours and primary notes, of which all other shades and all other sounds are composed, so there must be primary tastes, out of which all other flavours are evolved."

"I fear I do not quite follow you," said the Earl, looking puzzled.

But Kate's eyes brightened. She always enjoyed Orlando's trick of talking nonsense in a serio-comic way, and treating small items as if they were great abstractions. It diverted her from her own anxious thoughts.

"I know what you mean," she said; "if we could only discover the primary tastes, then we could say how many of them, and which, go to the making of one particular flavour."

“Exactly, Lady Katharine ; and thus cooking would be the most exact of the sciences, in addition to being, as it already is, the finest of the arts. Life would then offer us no more culinary disappointments—no more prandial failures. A leathery omelette would be as impossible as the squaring of the circle—an overcooked ortolan as unattainable as the secret of perpetual motion.”

Kate laughed that merry laugh of hers. “Let us see what are the fundamental notes of taste of which all other flavours are chords,” she said, ticking them off on her fingers. “There is sweetness and sourness and bitterness—and what else, Mr. Pratt?”

“I must consider,” replied Orlando, with his whimsical air of mock solemnity. “You see, the taste of fruit, for instance, is a chord made of the notes of sweetness and acidity, and one other note—which we have yet to discover—which differentiates between different fruits. Sweetness is the keynote of the strawberry, acidity the keynote of the lemon, and the spirit-taste the keynote of the apple.”

“And onions the keynote of the kitchen,” added Lady Claverley, with a sigh.

“I fear I must leave you for a while, as I have some letters to write,” said the Earl, rising from his seat ; “but I shall look forward to renewing this interesting—this very interesting—conversation at dinner. In the meantime I must commission my ladies to entertain you as well as they are able,” he added, with that doubt as to the entertaining powers of his female belongings which is inherent in the normal man.

But Orlando was quite content. He always preferred women’s society to men’s.

“I have a theory,” he continued, helping himself to a large slice of cake, “that there is a science of everything—a science of love and of happiness and of religion—and that when we have mastered these various branches of knowledge, life will once more become possible as well as interesting.”



“Why do you say ‘once more’?” asked Kate. “Has anybody ever mastered them before?”

“I say ‘once more’ because absolute ignorance and consummate knowledge attain identical results. Man was as perfectly healthy in the primæval days before medical science was ever heard of, as he will be in the future ages when all the secrets of medical science have been solved. The savage knows by instinct what it takes long ages of civilization to teach.”

Lady Claverley shook her head. “I don’t think the savage knows much that is worth learning, judging from the Church Missionary notices. And I don’t consider him at all a suitable person to be copied—especially by young people.”

“Pardon me, my dear lady, you are utterly mistaken. The real savage is a most delightful and instructive person.”

But Lady Claverley remained firm. “I don’t think his domestic arrangements are at all nice or proper; and his clothes are worse.”

“But his character is so fine and natural—so untrammelled. I assure you that whenever I find a savage instinct in myself, I gloat over it, and cultivate it under glass with artificial heat until it is full blown.”

“Well, all I can say is, Mr. Pratt, that I think you might be better employed,” said the Countess, with some justice.

“And then,” continued Orlando, “he is so wise, folly being the child of civilization. And following the example of Solomon, I pray for wisdom.”

“To pray for miracles,” said the lady impersonally, “is an act of presumption and a trial of faith.”

Orlando sighed and shook his head. “The savage is the true child of Nature. He is Nature’s first-born son and heir, while we are only her pampered foster-children.”

But Lady Claverley, having known better than an Earl for over thirty years, was not going to be convinced by a mere commoner. “And then he never goes to church on a Sunday morning,” she said, “and has no faith.”

"I daresay he has some sort of a faith of his own, and worships idols and temples and things," suggested Kate, "even though he isn't a Christian."

"But if he had faith he would be a Christian; you ought to know that, Kate, after my bringing up."

"By no means, my dear lady," persisted Orlando; "it is often people who are not Christians that have the greatest faith."

"But it can't be of any use to them if they have, or help them in their daily life," replied the Countess.

"But it does, Lady Claverley. I remember hearing a story of some people in India—by no means Christians—who were at a picnic, and found that there were not enough cups and saucers. So they just prayed, and then dug up the moss under a large tree, and there found the exact number of cups and saucers that were missing. Now could any faith be simpler, or more suited to daily needs?"

Kate's eyes glowed. "I think it was quite beautiful. What religion did you say they were?"

"I forget exactly, as it is a long time since I heard the story; but I know they belonged to one of the occult religions of the East."

"I wish to goodness Charles would join that religion!" murmured Lady Claverley, with a pious sigh. "He broke two of the very best Crown-Derby breakfast-cups only yesterday, and it is impossible to match them."

And then, tea being over, she left her daughter to entertain their guest, and joined her husband in the library.

"Claverley, I don't know what to make of that young man," she began; "it seems to me that he is very nervous and excitable, and talks a great deal of nonsense."

"Believe me, my dear Henrietta," Lord Claverley replied, "it is the fashion—quite the rage, in fact—nowadays to talk nonsense; and all the clever people of to-day are nervous, and what is called highly strung."

"They'd be strung still higher if I had my way," said her ladyship grimly.

"For my part, Henrietta, I was charmed—quite charmed—with our guest. He struck me as a young man of parts; and altogether as a most agreeable and gentlemanlike person."

"I don't believe that poor dear mamma would have liked him," Lady Claverley remarked.

But the Earl did not think any the less well of Orlando on that score. "You must bear in mind, Henrietta, that your late lamented mother, in spite of her many and great excellences, was a woman of strong—I may say of very strong—prejudices."

"I like prejudices; you know where you are with them, which you never do with opinions. I am afraid Mr. Pratt is a young man with opinions; and that is a pity, as so many opinions are wrong. You see, prejudices are neither right nor wrong; and opinions may be."

While his host and hostess were thus engaged in discussing him, Orlando was exchanging confidences with their daughter by the light of the hall fire.

"You seem depressed, Lady Katharine," he began as soon as they were left alone; "even more depressed than when you used to tell me all your troubles at Elnagar. What is wrong now?"

His tone of kindness was such a contrast to his usual air of cynical affectation that Kate could not but respond to it. There is nothing so effective as contrast. The amiability of the ill-tempered and the silence of the loquacious are forces which can remove mountains and displace seas. The naturalness of the affected is in its way almost as dynamic.

"Everything is positively loathsome," replied Kate; "that's what is wrong."

"Come, come, Lady Katharine, this will never do. We all of us have something in our lot that we do not exactly revel in; but there is no need to fix our whole attention on it. The

art of happiness is the art of looking the other way. Believe me, it is a mistake to make a collection of our crumpled rose leaves; to collect our defaced postage stamps is a more innocuous form of lunacy."

"But my particular crumpled rose leaf is such a horrid one for any girl to have; it is Mrs. MacBalloch's Will."

"It might have been spectacles, or a bad complexion; and that would have been considerably worse."

Kate condescended to smile faintly. "Yes, either of those would have been worse, I admit."

"Yet lots of girls—and quite deserving girls, too—have to put up with them; so why should you complain?"

"But I do so want to be happy and to enjoy myself," pleaded Kate.

"So does everybody. But, as a matter of fact, you have no more right to unclouded happiness than has anybody else."

"But I thought that you thought that happiness was a most awfully important thing. It was one of your pet theories at Elnagar."

"I do; but I think that you should cut your cloth according to the shape of coat that suits your particular figure, and not adapt your figure to the shape of a ready-made coat and then complain that it pinches. Happiness should be manufactured with the materials at hand—not with those which are out of stock."

"I suppose you are right; but it is very horrid of you," said Kate, with a sigh.

"I remember when I was a small boy," Orlando continued, "that two of my cousins and I were very fond of playing what we called whist; and sometimes a most disagreeable little sister of theirs was induced to come and make a fourth—which she would only consent to do on condition that she was given thirteen trumps in her hand; otherwise she threw down the cards in tears and temper. Now it seems to me, Lady Katharine, that you are willing to play the game of life on

condition that you can hold the thirteen trumps; otherwise you throw down the cards in tears and temper. Now that may be magnificent; but it isn't whist."

"I think you are very unkind to me, Mr. Pratt."

"No, I am not; but I want to teach you to take a sensible view of affairs, and to make the best of them. Also I would beg of you always to bear in mind that—in the case of a woman—to be happy is to be attractive, and to be attractive is to be happy."

"I thought that unhappy women were always the most attractive," argued Kate.

"Not a bit of it. Nine times out of ten a man would far rather a woman gave him a merry heart than a faithful one; it may be an inferior article in itself, but it is the article he wants."

"Then I suppose you would advise me—as mother does—to keep counting over what she calls my blessings," grumbled Kate.

"Certainly, I should say the guiding rule in life is 'Keep your eye on the blessing,' as the guiding rule in golf is 'Keep your eye on the ball.'"

## CHAPTER XXII

### THIN ICE

THE friendship between Mr. Pratt and Lady Kate grew apace. Because she found pleasure in his society and agreed with many of his views, Kate began to suspect that she was in love with him; and he was quite convinced that to be the husband of a rich and charming Countess was as agreeable a rôle as a man could be called upon to play. All his life he had been (or fancied he had been, which came to the same thing as far as he was concerned) at a disadvantage owing to his lack of any definite social position; and it is the things they do not possess which alone have the power to make men happy. Therefore the idea of always driving in a be-coroneted carriage, and of speaking of his wife to the servants as "her ladyship," appeared to Orlando as the acme of earthly bliss. Moreover (though this was a secondary consideration), Kate's mind and person were agreeable to him. But he never for a moment imagined—as did Kate—that he was in love.

That is one of the advantages of being a man. A man always knows when he is in love; but a woman frequently imagines herself in love when she is not, and the reverse. Thus it happens that a man often blames a woman for having deceived him, when as a matter of fact she has really been deceiving herself. There is so much less atmosphere in a man's mind than in a woman's, and therefore so much less tendency to mirage.

A hard frost had set in the day before Pratt arrived at

Claverley, and had put a sudden stop to the hunting. For the which Orlando was devoutly thankful, as his one sensation when he was on a horse was an ardent desire to alight with his own consent, before he was compelled to do so without it.

After four days' frost the extensive lake at the back of the Castle was pronounced to be safe for skating; and invitations were speedily sent out by Lady Claverley for a large skating-party.

It was a pretty sight to see the graceful forms of the skaters gliding up and down the huge black sheet of glass, bordered with overhanging trees which looked far more beautiful in their bridal veils of silver-tissue, woven for the occasion in the magic lace looms of the hoar-frost, than they had ever looked in their emerald-studded robes of summer. Lady Kate was an especially dainty figure, flitting here and there in her dark blue coat and scarlet toque, her small head looking like an animated holly-berry; and Orlando, who was a good skater, had never admired her as much as he did now, as with warmly clasped hands they two flew up and down the lake together. His admiration was further enhanced by the patent fact that Lady Kate was an object of universal attention, for he was one of the men who value their own possessions according to the price put upon them by other people.

"What shall we talk about?" asked Kate, as they glided easily and gracefully along.

"Whatever you like, Lady Katharine."

"We have talked over so many subjects that there do not seem any more left."

"Foolish Lady Kate! Don't you know that of all good things in life—of which conversation is one—the more you take and use, the more there are left? It is when we refuse to help ourselves to the gifts with which the gods have provided us that we find they suddenly come to an end. The absence of demand creates the stoppage of supply."

"You really are very nice and sensible," murmured Kate in admiration; "I do wish I knew as much as you!"

“Let me teach you all that I know.” And there was a note of genuine entreaty in Orlando’s voice.

“Then teach me the philosophy of life and the art of happiness.”

“The philosophy of life consists in many things.”

“Teach me some of them, then,” said Kate, who always insisted on having her own way.

“Well, first I should say that the philosophy of life is to make for a particular goal along the line of least resistance. Now there are so many people who prefer—actually *prefer*, mark you—to travel by the line of most resistance. Martyrs do always, and Liberals frequently, and they are rarely, if ever, philosophers. It is a mistake for a man to travel by the line of most resistance; for a woman to do so is positively indecent.”

“Then do you mean to say that a woman ought not to have an opinion of her own?” asked Kate, with a toss of her pretty head.

“Certainly not. A will of her own if she likes, but never an opinion. There is only one thing worse than a woman with opinions, and that is a woman with convictions. I don’t know why it is, but women with convictions always dress in tea-gowns; that is how you know them. And the tea-gowns are usually terra-cotta in colour. I once knew a man who, in a moment of inadvertence, married a woman with convictions.”

“And what happened?”

“The poor fellow hesitated for some time between the hangman’s rope and a lunatic asylum, and finally decided in favour of the lunatic asylum.”

Kate laughed. “I wonder he didn’t decide on that at first as the least of the two evils.”

“He was so afraid of meeting his wife there.”

“Well, tell me what else the philosophical woman ought to do, Mr. Pratt.”

“She ought never to think before she speaks. The woman



who thinks before she speaks is a nuisance. No man is justified in talking to her. But bad as she is, the woman who says what she thinks is even worse."

"But why shouldn't a woman say what she thinks?" asked Kate, with another toss of her head.

"Because she has no earthly right to publish any of her thoughts except such as are calculated to give pleasure to other people. The man or woman who utters unpleasant truths does despite to the common weal. In fact it is nothing but crass selfishness to indulge one's own *penchant* for truth-telling at the expense of one's neighbour's peace of mind. It is quite as bad as eating larks' tongues, or peacocks' brains. We have no right to buy our luxuries too dear."

"Then do you call truth-speaking a luxury, Mr. Pratt?"

"I do; and often a most expensive one."

"I should have called it a virtue."

"No; it is a pure luxury. And besides being usually expensive, it is invariably inartistic—like a Turkey carpet or a mahogany sideboard. In fact, most so-called virtues are really nothing but inartistic luxuries, of early Victorian design."

"Oh, Mr. Pratt, what a thing to say!"

"It is quite true. What, for instance, could be more inartistic than that crass unselfishness which is for ever laying itself in the dust for others to trample upon, and so giving them the trouble of making detours in order to avoid tumbling over it? What could be more inartistic than that flagrant humility which is for ever apologizing for its own existence, and so giving other people the trouble to respond to that apology? What could be more inartistic than that rampant altruism which is for ever performing the operation for mote upon its brother's eye? Oh, I could write a pamphlet upon unpardonable virtues!"

"What others should you include in your *Index Expurgatorius*?" asked Kate.

"Innumerable ones. For instance, what is more unpardon-

able than that complacent and immaculate amiability which acts as a violent irritant upon all surrounding tempers; or that praiseworthy caution which keeps up a public Wet-Blanket Emporium at its own expense; or that religious tolerance which doubts nothing but what is orthodox, and believes everything but what is true? Bah! I shudder to think of them all!"

"Then is there no virtue that you consider pardonable, Mr. Pratt?"

"Yes; courage. The courage that dares to be afraid."

"Any others?"

"The unselfishness that takes what is allotted to it rather than make a fuss, and the sincerity which considers the saving other people's feelings as more important than the exhibition of itself. I have also a considerable amount of admiration for the faith which ventures to place its own creeds before other people's caprices. This is considered narrow and old-fashioned, I know; but all the same I respect it."

Lady Kate, like the immortal Oliver, still asked for more. "And what other virtue do you admire?"

"The pride which never stoops to explain away its own falls, and the unreserve which keeps back nothing yet conceals everything."

"Oh! do you really like reserved people, Mr. Pratt?"

"Not at all. I hate the sinner, but I love the sin."

"I can't bear them. They always want to live in houses entirely composed of Bluebeard's chambers—the dining-room and the drawing-room and the library and the billiard-room are all alike locked up and furnished with old wives' heads. Such people give me the creeps!"

"Had Bluebeard been an artistic husband, Lady Katharine—which his beard alone proved that he was not—he would have furnished a bogus-room with photographs of Fatima's old lovers, and would have forbidden her to go into it. Then she would have spent all her time there when he was not at home,

and would never have found out the real secret-chamber at all. The only way to keep a secret that matters is to tell one that does not."

"Then do you think people expect us all to have a secret of some kind, Mr. Pratt?"

"Undoubtedly. No house is complete without its Bluebeard's chamber; and our neighbours never rest until they find out how this is furnished. The wise man builds one, furnishes it with any cast-off heads or worn-out skeletons that he has quite done with, forbids his friends to enter it, and leaves the key lying about. As soon as his back is turned they go in, rummage everywhere and examine everything, and then tell all their other friends and acquaintances what they have found inside. And all the time they have not an idea that on the other side of the house is a whole suite of real Bluebeard's chambers, filled with still bleeding heads and living skeletons, where the secret of the man's life lies hidden."

"I believe you are right."

"I know I am, Lady Katharine. In the same way people frequently confess sins they have never committed in order to conceal those they have. When a man says, with an air of engaging frankness, 'Oh, I have such a hasty temper!' I know he is endeavouring to disguise the fact that he is brutally selfish and inordinately vain. When a woman confesses, with a smile of sweet simplicity, 'Alas, I fear I am giddy and thoughtless!' I know she is trying to hide from me that she is coldly calculating and cruelly malicious."

"It is really very interesting," said Kate thoughtfully, "to learn something of your philosophy: because life has seemed to me so difficult just of late, and I have had nobody to guide me. But you are a sort of moral Bradshaw."

Orlando bent his head. "Then keep me permanently, Lady Kate; for life without a Bradshaw is a hopeless labyrinth."

Kate tried to put him off with a light laugh. "But one

wants a new one every month. Last month's Bradshaw is worse than no Bradshaw at all."

"You would always find me up to date. I would constantly re-edit myself so that I might never lead you astray. Kate, don't you know that I love you? Won't you be my wife?"

Kate was silent. There rushed over her the thought of all that this man was to her, and all that he might be. She felt that in his constant society she would never feel dull—never depressed. He greatly attracted the intellectual side of her: and at present she did not know that she had any other. What could she do better than accept him? she asked herself. She must marry: she must marry soon: and surely here was the very man for the post. He seemed to her as good as a circulating library: with him she would never lack something to interest her—something to instruct. She had not yet learnt that when a man is as good as literature to a woman, that is friendship: but when he is as good as music to her, that is love. It is not when he has the same effect as a library that he is dangerous, but when he has the same effect as an oratorio. Until then he is a luxury rather than a necessity: and it is a mistake for any woman to tie herself for life to a mere luxury. But all this was as yet hid from Kate.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Suddenly it seemed as if a hundred unseen cannon had fired themselves off simultaneously, in fierce besiegement of some invisible fort: and then the huge sheet of ice slowly opened its black jaws and began to yawn.

The skaters flew some in one direction and some in another, each taking the nearest path to the shore of the lake. And Orlando Pratt—loosing both Kate's hands in the absolute forgetfulness of overmastering fear—made his way alone as fast as he could to a place of safety.

Her hands were dropped so suddenly—so unexpectedly—that for a moment the girl staggered: then she too realized her danger, and sought the nearest bank, her light weight gliding in safety over the places where the ice was becoming thinnest.

Then followed that delightful moment of the return to the commonplace after a threatened tragedy. We all know it. Perhaps one of the most distressing parts of a great danger or a great sorrow is the unusualness, the unnaturalness of it all. In its shadow everything looks different; even the trees and fields and flowers. Our very chairs and tables change from familiar friends into chance acquaintances; and the well-known patterns of the wall-papers develop into strange hieroglyphics, traced by unseen fingers upon our walls. Then—sometimes suddenly because the danger is averted, sometimes gradually because the sorrow is outlived—things once more become normal; the trees and flowers take their natural colour and shape, and the round world rolls on again in the dear old usual way. And then we learn that this same usual way is really dearer to us than any rare moments of ecstasy, or thrilling crises of bliss.

Joy may lie in the rare, the unexpected and the exceptional; but happiness is found in the ordinary and the commonplace.

This feeling—in a slight degree—inspired all the skaters on Claverley Mere, when the cracking sound subsided and they found they were all safe. Kate, with her exuberant vitality, experienced it more poignantly than did most; and for a few minutes she was conscious of nothing but the delight of escape from danger. Then she remembered Orlando: and with that memory came a rush of disturbing thoughts.

The first impulse of us all, when anything unusual happens, is to consider the event from a subjective point of view—to see how it affects ourselves: our next is to look at it objectively—to see how it appears upon its own merits when regarded from an abstract standpoint. Thus Kate's first feeling against her recalcitrant suitor was anger—anger that he should have dared to treat her with such indifference and neglect: and her second was contempt—contempt for a man (so called) who could show the white feather upon such slight provocation. And this second feeling was the stronger of the two.

We are angry with our friends when they sin against us : but we are far more indignant when they sin against themselves. The former offence it is ours to punish or to forgive as we think fit ; and we do either the one or the other, and frequently both. At any rate the issues of the matter are practically in our hands. But when our friend sins against himself and his own soul, it is neither ours to pardon nor to condemn : he has inscribed the sentence against himself, and what he has written he has written ; we are powerless, with all our tears of anger or of sorrow, to wash out one word of the handwriting that is against him. Therefore our indignation against his misdeed has the added sting of futility. We, alas ! cannot make agreement for him. It cost more to redeem his soul, and we must let that alone for ever.

Orlando had wounded Kate more deeply by his denial of his own ideals than by his affront to herself : which proved the generous nature of the girl. And again she was one of the many women to whom physical courage is, in a man, the one important virtue. Without this, all other masculine excellences count for nothing : with it, all masculine shortcomings are condoned. By that one moment of overmastering panic Orlando had forfeited Kate's respect and earned her contempt. He had fallen from his high place in her estimation ; and not all the king's horses nor all the king's men could restore him to that lofty eminence.

Finally, Kate was too young as yet to understand human nature : therefore she was too young to pardon it. The young may forget : but it is only older ones who can forgive. Forgetfulness is a youthful art : forgiveness, a mature accomplishment. She had not yet learnt that one foolish moment does not cancel the wisdom of a lifetime—that to fall short of our ideals does not prove them to have been false ones. She had not yet discovered the great truth that it is our best moments—not our worst—that reveal our real selves : that if we would judge righteous judgment, we must appraise a man according

to the good that he would and did not, rather than according to the evil that he would not and yet did. It is our highest aspirations that are the true tests of our normal spiritual condition: our faults and failures are but symptoms of the transitory and abnormal disease which men call Sin.

In vain did Orlando humble himself before Kate and sue for her forgiveness; in vain did he try to show her that one moment is not the whole man. He had given the lie to his own philosophy—he had fallen short of his own ideals—and therefore she would have none of him. Laboriously he pointed out to her that his courage lay in his mind rather than in his body; that moral and mental deficiencies were a man's fault, while physical defects were his misfortune; that he himself had preached the gospel of the courage that dared to be afraid. It was no good. He had proved himself to be different from what Kate had imagined him to be; and that is a sin which no woman can forgive—at least, no woman under thirty, and only about three per cent. over that age.

So Orlando Pratt had to ride away from Claverley Castle in a humble and penitent frame of mind; while Lady Kate was left alone without a lover, and with only five weeks in which to get one, if she wanted to secure Mrs. MacBalloch's fortune.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE MARQUIS OF TAYBRIDGE

IT was now the middle of January, and Lady Kate was as disengaged as ever; yet the twentieth of February saw the end of Mrs. MacBalloch's six months' probation. If Kate were not married within a month from now she would lose the whole of the MacBalloch property, and the Claverley peerage would be practically penniless.

The Earl openly fumed and fretted, while his wife alternately rebuked and petted him as a good wife should; but even she could not altogether conceal her disappointment that her daughter was missing, through self-will and obstinacy, so great a prize; and was failing by a neck (and such a very stiff neck, too) in winning so easy a race. Perhaps her mother was quite as much vexed with Kate as Lord Claverley was; but, being a woman, she concealed it better. The aggravating thing was that Kate was certain to marry some time or another; she was the last woman to continue permanently a spinster; and therefore it was so maddening for all concerned that she could not fit it in when it was of such consummate importance.

There are no more aggravating people on earth than the people who do the right thing at the wrong time. The people who do the wrong thing are not to be compared with them for sheer irritation. And, alas! their name is Legion. If he gives twice who gives quickly, then he who gives at the wrong time had better have withheld his hand altogether. We all know them, those worthy people, whose consciences are as



determined as was Balaam's ass in refusing to carry them along any road that leads to anywhere; but as soon as the advantageous highway is turned into an unprofitable *cul-de-sac*, they are ready to gallop along it at full speed. They are the people who can always do what you want, except just at the time when you want them to do it; then they are always otherwise engaged—probably in doing something for somebody else at the precise moment when somebody else does not wish it done.

To call Lady Katharine Clare "a worthy person," would be altogether unjust and beside the mark; she was young, and bright, and beautiful, and everything that conventional "worthiness" is not. But Lady Claverley—with the all-seeing eye of motherhood—perceived in her daughter signs of certain dormant qualities altogether foreign to the race of Laurie; germs of inborn characteristics peculiar to the house of Clare. And the sight distressed her not a little. Now and again her daughter did something which—so Lady Claverley expressed it to herself—"reminded her of poor Arabella"; and she could not have said anything more severe or more expressive of extreme disapproval. A woman rarely rebels when her children resemble their father; it is when they resemble their father's relations that the trials of motherhood are hard to bear. She can generally forgive her husband for being what he is, but she finds it more difficult to pardon his kinsfolk for being exactly like him.

The Countess was one of those delightful women who combine extreme amiability with unfailing common sense; but there was one thing which she could not forgive, and that was the behaviour of persons who did not do exactly what she herself would have done had she been in the same circumstances. It may be true that to understand all is to forgive all; anyhow, the opposite held good with Lady Claverley. She never forgave what she could not understand. In justice to her, it must be admitted that she always did the sensible,

and nearly always the wise thing. She did not make mistakes, and had no patience with people who did—unless they happened to be men, in which case she expected it, and was almost disappointed when they did not fulfil her expectations. Lady Claverley possessed in an unusual degree the by no means ordinary gift of seeing things and people as they are. In her own mind she neither idealized nor exaggerated; and she had therefore nothing in common with people who did. It was impossible for her to look at anything from their point of view. She even saw herself very much as others saw her; therefore she had no sympathy with the self-deceived.

Lady Kate, also, was becoming anxious and unhappy. Now that she was, so to speak, in sight of the door of her old home—that door, which, unless she married, and married soon, must inevitably be shut in the face of herself and her parents by some rich and low-born interloper—she did not like the prospect. She began to feel that it would be pleasanter to live at Claverley, even with a husband, than to leave Claverley altogether; that Paradise—even when encumbered with an Adam—would be a more agreeable place of residence than the wilderness of thorns and thistles outside. It was one thing to talk about defying Mrs. MacBalloch's Will and losing her fortune; it was quite another to do it. There is so much in life that looks charming in the far distance, but hideous in the foreground of the picture. The act of moral perspective is the science of life.

Thus things were looking rather dismal at Claverley Castle at this particular moment, as things always look more dismal in the third week of January than at any other season of the year, the weather being more depressing than at any other time. It is then that the winter has taken the turn for the better, and yet is not actually much brighter than it was when we knew and expected it to be growing worse; and it is always the early stages of convalescence that are—for the invalid—the hardest part of an illness. Consequently there

was considerable joy and gladness when a letter arrived from Lord Taybridge intimating that he was coming to pay a visit to the Castle in order to renew his suit.

By this time Lord Claverley was so anxious for his daughter to marry within the appointed time, that his objection to merging his old earldom into a new dukedom was entirely lost sight of; and, moreover, the Marquis had signified his readiness—in the event of the marriage—to settle the Claverley title and estates upon his second son, in order that the older peerage should not lapse altogether. The Countess kept remarking to herself—and to others—that she was sure Taybridge had been well brought up: her highest meed of praise. And even Kate, in her reaction against the high thinking and fine talking of Orlando Pratt, was inclined to look favourably upon the more solid and practical excellences of her noble suitor. In the interregnum between the old love and the new, it is always by his unlikeness to his predecessor that the latter will establish his claim upon the vacant throne; it is only when the family resemblance between them is least apparent, that we consent to kill Charles in order to make James king. Whatever else Orlando might be, he was never stupid; therefore Lord Taybridge's stupidity was a distinct advantage to him just now in differentiating between himself and his predecessor.

It is the ills from which we have just emerged that seem most undesirable to human nature. Have we recently escaped from the jurisdiction of a cook who reduced every dish to ashes, we pray that her successor may err on the side of rawness; have we lately quarrelled with a lover who was too epigrammatic, we show favour to the suitor whose bane is verbosity. Therefore Lord Taybridge, with unaccustomed tact, appeared again upon the scene in the very nick of time most favourable for that reappearance.

As for Aubrey Lestrangle, he was by no means idle just then, but was busily engaged in the turning of such stones as he

believed would enable him to gain a more ample competence than that with which his noble brother-in-law was able to provide him. With that apparent frankness which is the most impregnable form of reserve, he had gone straight to Mr. Pettigrew and taken that gentleman into as much of his confidence as he thought desirable; the result being that Ebenezer had promised him a very large sum of money if—through his influence, as represented by Sapphira—Lady Kate's marriage were postponed until after the expiration of the six months' probation. Lestrangle easily succeeded in convincing Mr. Pettigrew that he was able, with Sapphira as his tool, to compass a considerable amount of wire-pulling at Claverley Castle, and there was some ground for this conviction; for whatever happened at Claverley was immediately reported by Sapphira to her father, and Sapphira's influence over Kate was considerable, as is always the influence of those with whom we are in daily companionship, however low an opinion we may entertain of their intellectual powers.

This arrangement with Lestrangle was very satisfactory to Mr. Pettigrew. Ebenezer always liked to have an accomplice in his undertakings upon whom he could shift the responsibility and the blame. As a rule, he relegated this office to Providence, and persuaded himself that he was carrying out Divine intentions when in reality he was serving his own interests. But in the present instance Providence seemed to be displaying a lamentable indifference to Mr. Pettigrew's wishes: so he felt bound to call in another opinion in the shape of Aubrey Lestrangle. True, Lady Kate was not yet married; but she had been within an ace of it; and the woman who has nearly been married is always in danger of falling into the snare again. Moreover, she had declined to oblige Mr. Pettigrew by marrying his son; and no fire had fallen from heaven to punish such insubordination. Consequently it was high time to supplement Providence with a little extra help.

"I don't know, after all," said Lady Kate to her usual con-

fidante a day or two after the arrival of the Marquis, "that I could do better than Taybridge. He is stupid enough to make an ideal husband; and a husband of some kind—either ideal or otherwise—seems to be an absolute necessity just now."

"You have changed your views considerably," replied Sapphira, carrying out her father's instructions to do all in her power to prevent Kate's marriage; "not long ago nothing in the shape of a husband was good enough for you: now anything in the guise of a man will do."

Kate winced. "Circumstances alter cases," she explained.

"They do; especially reduced circumstances."

"Besides, Sapphira, Taybridge will be a duke, even though it is not an old peerage. I prefer old titles myself, I admit, just as I prefer stale loaves; but a new loaf is better than no bread, which is what we seem to be coming to: and a duke's a duke for a' that, even if the tissue-paper has not yet been taken off his brand-new coronet."

"Nevertheless," sneered Sapphira, "novelty is not such an advantage in a coronet as it is in a hat. You had better advertize, 'This year's coronets! Novelties of the season! Apply to the Duke of Deeside, Grosvenor Square.' It will be interesting to see what a new coronet looks like: we have hitherto been accustomed to such old ones."

Again Kate winced. "But the old ones were such empty honours."

"So will the new one be when Lord Taybridge puts it on."

"I can't think what has made you take such a dislike to Taybridge, Sapphira. You rather liked him when we were at Elnagar in the autumn; and I am sure he hasn't improved in the least since then. If he had grown one atom less stupid, I could understand your change of front; but he hasn't."

"He certainly has not."

"Well, then, what have you got to grumble at? I know how irritating it is when people don't play their parts—when people whom you expect to be disagreeable are unexpectedly

pleasant, and when people whom you expect to be stupid are unusually intelligent. That is a most upsetting sort of thing to happen. But there's nothing of that kind about Taybridge: he never disappoints one—he is always quite as stupid as one could possibly expect."

Sapphira did not think it necessary to say that it was her father's return which had thus altered her tactics, so she merely replied—

"Denseness may be an admirable quality in a stone wall, but it is hardly an engaging trait in a lover."

"But I am so tired of cleverness, Sapphira. Talking to Mr. Pratt was like living upon nothing but the top-layer of trifle and the froth of ginger-beer; and those are most unsatisfactory forms of nourishment, and make one want something solid for a change. Now, Taybridge is distinctly solid: he reminds me of boiled beef and suet pudding."

"But he is ineffably stupid."

"Stupidity is very restful, and I am so dreadfully tired. When he begins one of his long and pointless anecdotes, I feel just as I do when I am listening to a sermon—good and peaceful and unintelligent. Orlando Pratt was so terribly intelligent, and made me so terribly intelligent, that now I am like a pencil which has been sharpened till the point broke—there's nothing left of me but a dubby piece of blacklead that couldn't write two consecutive words." Kate's eyes were wistful, and her mouth had a pensive droop.

"I can't think what has changed *you* so," said Sapphira, with scorn; "you are the one that has changed, not I. You've lost all your spirit."

"I know I have; it has been knocked out of me somehow. I think it is the thought of losing Claverley. I feel I could bear anything—even a husband—better than that."

"Even if that husband were Lord Taybridge?"

"Even if that husband were Lord Taybridge."

Thus it will be seen that just now the course of true love was running smoothly for the Marquis of Taybridge.

“I suppose,” he said to Lady Kate one day, “that you are aware of the object that has brought me to Claverley Castle.”

“You’d better tell me. I am a poor hand at guessing.”

“I have come to repeat an offer which I made to you when I had the pleasure of meeting you at Elnagar last autumn; the offer of what I think I may truthfully term my hand and heart.”

“You again pay me a great compliment.”

“That may be; but it is by no means an empty compliment; for the happiness of my whole life—that is to say the whole of my future life dating from the present moment—depends upon your answer.”

The young man was so evidently in earnest that a great wave of pity for him swept over Kate’s heart. “Are you sure I could make you happy, Lord Taybridge?”

“I am; that is to say, as sure as a man can possibly be of anything which he has not yet experienced. One can never be absolutely certain of the unknown; but approximately I am sure that we should be happy together.”

“I think I am bound to tell you that my feeling for you is respect and esteem and friendship and all that sort of thing rather than love,” Kate explained.

“I can quite understand that,” replied Taybridge humbly; “there is nothing in me to excite the passionate enthusiasm which is known by the name of love; and I do not expect or ask for the impossible. To do so is to condemn oneself to disappointment. But I venture to think—I may almost go so far as to say I venture to predict—that two persons who have so many tastes in common as you and I are bound—or perhaps I should say are most likely—to be happy together.”

“Yes,” murmured Kate doubtfully. She could not for the life of her think of one taste in common, except a desire to save from poverty the Claverley peerage.

“You see,” her lover continued, “we both have a very

strong sense of humour ; and somebody said at Elnagar, if you remember—I cannot at the moment recall who it was, but that has no bearing upon the point of the remark—that if two people laughed at the same things, they were sure to get on well together.”

“I remember.” Kate was still besieged with doubts.

“Well, I have noticed that you always enjoy my little stories, and laugh heartily at them ; and that proves that the same things tickle us both. I am a great hand at telling stories, you know ; I have quite a repertoire of them if only I could recall them oftener ; and I have particularly noticed how thoroughly you always appreciate them.”

Kate felt the hot wave of remorse which always overwhelms us when we are commended for doing the very thing which we have left undone. It is as painful to be commended for the deed we have not done as it is delightful to be praised for the quality we do not possess.

But Lord Taybridge continued in sweet unconsciousness of his companion’s discomfiture. “It is a great encouragement for a man like me—who sets up for being by way of a funny dog, don’t you know?—to find anyone who appreciates his little jokes and anecdotes. I think it is a duty one owes to society to be as funny as one can ; but it is uphill work when all one’s little efforts fall flat.”

“It is indeed. A joke that dies of neglect in its infancy is a positive disgrace to its perpetrator. One buries the poor little thing out of sight at once, and tries to forget that it ever existed ; but all the same, its wretched little ghost haunts one with a lurid conviction of social failure. I think that in the valley of the shadow of the might-have-beens there are no more melancholy little shadows than the ghosts of jokes that nobody ever saw. I could always cry for sheer pity when I hear anybody make a joke that dies unseen.”

Lord Taybridge looked interested but puzzled. “I do not quite follow you, Lady Katharine. How can a thing like a



joke have a ghost? I always imagined that ghosts were the representatives after death of persons, not of things. I may be mistaken; but that is the impression that has always been left upon my mind after listening to any conversation upon the subject of ghosts."

Kate made a grimace which her lover could not see. "Of course, of course, how stupid of me to get so mixed! And I have always heard that it is a most pernicious custom to mix one's spirits."

"That, Lady Katharine, refers to spirits which we drink, not to spirits of the air."

"You mean not to spirits of the air, but to spirits of the water."

"Again you misunderstand me," Lord Taybridge laboriously explained; "there is no objection to mixing spirits with water—quite the contrary. The objection is to mixing one spirit with another; but the addition of a little—or, still better, of a considerable quantity of water minifies instead of increasing the bad effects of the alcohol."

"I see," replied Kate meekly. Such sublime stupidity as this was more than soothing—it was a positive sedative.

"But we are wandering from the matter under consideration, Lady Katharine, and that is whether you will reconsider your refusal of last August (or was it September? I cannot recall the exact date, but whenever it was has no bearing upon the point at issue) and will consent after all to be my wife?"

"I will, Lord Taybridge; that is to say, if you will take me as I am, and not expect any violent emotion on my part."

"Certainly not. In fact anything of that kind would upset and inconvenience me. I have never been accustomed to it, as both my father and mother are most undemonstrative persons."

Kate shrugged her shoulders. "Still, love is supposed to be an important ingredient in the composition of a happy marriage."

"That may be true of marriage in the abstract ; but we two are so similar in mind, and have such uniform tastes, that I think—I may say I am sure—that we can be happy quite independently of any purely emotional sensations."

"Then let it be so," replied Kate wearily.

"And I venture to imagine—I might almost say to affirm—that you will offer no objection to a speedy marriage. As we have finally decided to marry one another, it would be a pity not to do so within Mrs. MacBalloch's six months, and thus, so to speak, kill two birds with one stone, and secure the deceased lady's fortune."

Kate agreed to this and said so ; but, all the same, she winced at her suitor's bald way of putting things, though she could not deny that his view of the matter was distinguished by ultra common sense.

"Then," continued the Marquis, "I think we may consider ourselves engaged. And that being so, and our affairs practically settled, I must ask you to excuse me for a couple of days to attend a board meeting in London. As you have accepted me, and there is nothing more to be said on that matter, I think you will agree with me that it would be a pity to miss a director's fee—especially when I am half-way from Scotland to London already."

"A great pity," replied Kate ; but her lip curled.

"Then I will go up to town to-morrow to be in good time for the meeting of the directors of the South Caledonian and Northumbrian Railway next morning, and will return here some time on the following day ; when we will consider the arrangements for our wedding, which must take place, I believe, some time before the middle of February."

"Mrs. MacBalloch died on the twentieth of August."

"Then any time before the twentieth of February will do for us, unless her Will denoted lunar instead of calendar months, when it must be at a somewhat earlier date. I must inquire into this."

"It said six calendar months in the Will," said Kate.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely certain. That hateful Will is printed on my heart in as big posters as ever *Calais* was on Queen Mary's."

"One cannot be too careful about dates in a matter such as this," objected the ever-cautious Taybridge. "I must consult someone in authority."

"You can consult anybody you like, but you'll still find that those particular months were calendar."

"Very well. I cannot help thinking that Valentine's day would be a good day for our wedding—so romantic and appropriate, and all that, don't you know? And that would be quite safe, even if the six months turned out after all to be lunar instead of calendar ones."

"They'll turn out to be nothing of the kind," persisted Kate, with some obstinacy.

"I only said, even if they did; and one cannot take too many precautions in dealing with wills and weddings and matters of that sort."

"All right, just as you like," replied Kate in that tired voice which she had lately developed; "I don't care a rap when it is."

So Lady Kate's wedding was fixed for the fourteenth of February, and joy reigned again at Claverley Castle.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE DIRECTORS' MEETING

LORD TAYBRIDGE duly carried out his plan for securing the director's fee, which he felt with his usual prudence would be useful in helping to discharge those numerous taxes which beset the path of the man who is entering upon the marriage state. As the wedding was to take place so soon, he reflected that it was ridiculous for him to have any scruples about leaving his bride-elect, especially as she had expressly stated that she did not look for the delicate attentions which the newly engaged maiden usually receives. As for Kate, she was not without prudent forethought, and her reflections were to the effect that as she would have to endure a good deal of Lord Taybridge's company in the near future, the less she saw of him in the immediate present the better. So the noble Marquis departed to London, where he devoted his powerful intellect and native caution to the affairs of the Midlothian and Northumbrian Railway Company. Perhaps his caution was more apparent to his colleagues than his capacity, for it led him to require every matter to be explained three several times. Indeed it may be said that had not his rank been in inverse proportion to his intelligence, he would not have figured on the board. As it was, his presence there formed a very satisfactory answer to the frequently impertinent question of Romeo, "What's in a name?"

At the board meeting the Marquis noticed a new director, who, despite the fact that it was his first appearance, took a

prominent part in the discussion most inappropriate in a neophyte; and who, moreover, had the audacity to exhibit a complete grasp of the affairs of the company, as well as much native shrewdness. After the formal proceedings were over and the directors were chatting one with another, the chairman came up to Lord Taybridge and introduced this officious person to him by the name of Pettigrew.

"Most happy, I am sure," said the Marquis gracefully. "Pettigrew, Pettigrew? I seem to know the name; where can I have heard it?"

"Most probably you have heard it frequently in the City," said the chairman; "our new colleague has an excellent reputation as a man of business."

"My dear sir," interposed Mr. Pettigrew, with a deprecating gesture, "you speak of my humble efforts far too favourably. If I have met with any success in such little business affairs as have come my way, I do not attribute it to myself; I give the praise Elsewhere, I give the praise Elsewhere." And Mr. Pettigrew raised his eyes and shook his head in self-depreciation.

"I have it," cried Lord Taybridge, "I have it. I heard your name mentioned by the Claverleys."

At this Mr. Pettigrew's face flushed darkly. He had forgotten nothing; he had forgiven nothing. But it was not his cue to let Lord Taybridge know his private feelings at present.

"Ah, you know the Claverleys, do you, Lord Taybridge?" said he, trying to speak easily. "A very affable man, his lordship, very affable."

"Why, yes, Lord Claverley is a pleasant man, and he has a charming place. Are you going my way, Mr. Pettigrew?" And Lord Taybridge prepared to leave the room.

The mention of the Claverleys made any way which Taybridge might select Mr. Pettigrew's way; so the two men went out together.

"And what, if I may be so bold, did his lordship say of me?" asked Mr. Pettigrew.

"Oh! nothing very particular. He told me you had been staying at the Castle with Mrs. Pettigrew, and your son and daughter. At least," added Taybridge cautiously, "I think it was a son and daughter. It might have been two daughters, but that doesn't affect the state of affairs in the slightest degree—it was two children, and I am sure they were either sons or daughters."

"Son and daughter, my lord; simply son and daughter. And what did his lordship say of us?"

"He merely remarked what agreeable people you were—as I am sure he was justified in doing," said Taybridge, with a polite bow; "and I think he mentioned that you were some connection of his cousin, Mrs. MacBalloch."

"He did not refer at all to her Will, did he?" asked Mr. Pettigrew anxiously.

"Well, I cannot say that he did not refer to the Will, but I am certain that he did not mention you in connection with it. It was a matter which concerned me alone."

Mr. Pettigrew looked relieved, and at the same time puzzled.

"You will pardon me, my lord, but I do not see what you have to do with Mrs. MacBalloch's Will."

"You will allow me to say, Mr. Pettigrew, that your reference to my private affairs strikes me as unusual—yes, certainly unusual. But as you seem to be a connection of Mrs. MacBalloch's husband, I have no objection to tell you that I have a certain interest in her Will."

"But, my lord, I can contradict you there—contradict you with the greatest confidence. I have read that document, and I assure you your name is not once mentioned."

"My dear sir, you will permit me to say that this heat is by no means becoming or even necessary. I have not read the Will myself, so I do not know if you, for instance, are a legatee or not. But I am informed by Lord Claverley, and I have no reason whatever to doubt his word, that his daughter, Lady Katharine, is Mrs. MacBalloch's heiress."

"Not quite so fast, my lord; not quite so fast. Lady Katharine will not inherit unless she marries before six months have elapsed."

"That is so, Mr. Pettigrew; you are evidently well informed. And that explains how I happen to be interested in the Will."

"You don't mean to say," began Mr. Pettigrew, with much agitation.

"Gently, my dear sir, gently," said Taybridge soothingly. "I mean to say—you will see the announcement in tomorrow's *Morning Post*—that Lady Katharine Clare will become the Marchioness of Taybridge on the fourteenth of next month."

Mr. Pettigrew stopped suddenly, and smote one hand in the other. If it had been a less public and a less crowded place, he might have torn his hair, or put on sackcloth and ashes, or adopted some other time-honoured device for expressing grief and mortification. As it was, he swore beneath his breath, and then remembered in time that he must dissemble. It would never do for Taybridge to know how deep was his interest in the matter, how vital it was to him that this marriage should not take place. Wherefore he smoothed his brow; and with an affectation of geniality, which was a lamentable failure, begged to offer his congratulations.

"I am sure you are very kind," replied Lord Taybridge condescendingly, and with a subtle suggestion in his manner that it was the lady who should be congratulated in this case.

"Ah! I now see why Lord Claverley didn't say much about us to your lordship," said the worthy man. "Yes, yes, and why he tried to keep Sammy dark. Yes, yes, clever of his lordship, very clever! You thought I had two daughters, and no son, eh?"

"I was certainly under the impression; but I am sure the error, if error there be, was mine. Lord Claverley would never have made an incorrect statement on so trivial a point,

or, indeed, on any point." The sex of a child in a family without entailed property was a most trivial matter to Lord Taybridge. He regarded it as a distinction without a difference.

"Exactly, my lord. And I suppose his lordship did not tell you that Sam was engaged to Lady Katharine?"

"Engaged to Lady Katharine?" cried Taybridge, now fairly roused. "What on earth do you mean, Mr. Pettigrew? May I ask if you have lost your senses?"

"Nor that Sam threw her over, when he found out all about her?" went on Pettigrew.

"Threw her over? Oh, the man's mad!"

"See here, my lord," said Pettigrew mysteriously, "this is not the place to discuss family matters." And, indeed, although they were now in a comparatively quiet side-street, passers-by were looking at them with some wonder. "Your lordship has been taken in, there's no doubt of that. Come and dine with me at my club to-night"—and he mentioned a second-rate establishment, the portals of which Taybridge would in other circumstances never have dreamed of entering. "Dine with me to-night, and we will talk it over."

"But, Mr. Pettigrew," began the bewildered Taybridge.

"Not a word more, not a word more. Seven-thirty sharp." And Mr. Pettigrew hailed a passing hansom, and jumped in, leaving the Marquis a prey to utter perplexity and grave apprehension.

The fact that Kate had been engaged before did not trouble him: such little accidents were common enough. But to be engaged to the son of this impossible person! To be engaged to a Sammy! Nay, more, to be thrown over by a Sammy! Taybridge shook his head gravely. This must be looked into. Then as his mind moved on slowly indeed but surely, he began to ask himself what could have induced the said Sammy to throw up so splendid a match. What possible way could he do better for himself than by marrying a lovely girl, the



daughter of an ancient house, who would be a Countess in her own right—especially when the marriage would secure a large fortune? Taybridge felt it must be a very serious matter indeed: it must certainly be looked into. His native caution was not likely to permit him to take an irrevocable step—for even in these deplorable days of slack views men instinctively begin by regarding marriage as irrevocable—without being thoroughly reassured as to the wisdom of his course of action. He would certainly dine with this Mr. Pettigrew, and force him to give a full, true, and particular account of his mysterious hints. Taybridge again shook his head: he did not at all like the present aspect of affairs. He wished his mother were in town so that he could consult her at once.

Meanwhile Ebenezer drove to an obscure street in Soho. There dismissing his cabman, not without receiving divers uncomplimentary comments on the bare legal fare he tendered, he sought out a dingy house, where, on inquiring for Mr. Andrew Lawson, he was shown into a room where Sapphira's excellent father was indulging in a meal which seemed to be a compromise between breakfast and lunch. Aubrey had found it convenient to adopt a new appellation on revisiting the great metropolis, where there were many who would have shown a greater interest in his return than he cared to excite.

“Look here, Lestrangle, you are not treating me fairly,” cried Ebenezer. “I'm paying you handsomely to get full information of all that goes on at Claverley, and here I find you are withholding from me most important news.”

“Not so fast, my good friend, not so fast. I have concealed nothing.”

“Then you are deceiving me in pretending that you can get information. But, I tell you, I am not to be trifled with. And if you prove to be an impostor, not a penny of mine will you see. And I'll let the old Earl know the state of affairs, and then your goose will be cooked. Your daughter will be turned out of the house, and that will not suit you, my friend.”

Lestrangle flushed darkly, but by a strong effort he controlled his temper.

“See here, Pettigrew; hard words don’t break bones. We are neither of us acting a high moral part, so it’s no use calling one another names. Still I am not an impostor so far as you are concerned. What I’ve promised you I’ve performed. I’m earning your money, even if it is in a blackguardly way.”

“Well, then, how do you explain the fact that you have never told me that Lady Katharine was engaged to Lord Taybridge? Either you have concealed the fact, or else you didn’t know it—in which case what becomes of your special source of information?”

“That is easily answered. It was only the night before last that Taybridge proposed.”

“That’s all rubbish,” cried Pettigrew angrily; “why, man alive, I’ve seen Taybridge himself this morning, and he told me the news.”

“Exactly,” replied Lestrangle coolly. “Taybridge proposed the night before last, was accepted, came up to town yesterday, and—so it seems—met you to-day. You’ll see all about it in this letter from Sapphira. It only came this morning—and I sent you word at once. You’ll find my letter when you get home.”

Pettigrew fairly gasped with astonishment.

“Got engaged on Tuesday, and left the girl the next day? Impossible!”

“See for yourself: read Sapphira’s letter.”

And Pettigrew read with increasing astonishment.

“Well, well, wonders will never cease! I apologize, Lestrangle, I apologize.”

Lestrangle nodded. “All right!” he said; “but don’t indulge in such tantrums again, or you’ll find I shall cut up rough.”

“But what is to be done now?” asked Ebenezer.

Lestrangle shrugged his shoulders.

"You'd better tell me all about what you heard from Lord Taybridge, and what you replied."

Whereupon Mr. Pettigrew gave an exhaustive and graphic account of his interview with the prospective bridegroom. Lestrangle listened carefully with bent brow.

"Well," he remarked when the other had finished his recital, "it seems to me you have managed pretty well. You don't seem to have to take lessons from me in the art of—misstatement, shall we call it? It was a good notion of yours saying that the young lady had been engaged to your own son—a lie, eh?—of course a lie!—but still a useful one."

"Well, you see, Lestrangle," said Ebenezer almost apologetically, "I had to do something. They are to be married on the fourteenth; and the only thing possible seemed to me to make him think that Lady Katharine was a bad lot. And so she is, curse her!" he went on vindictively. "Didn't she throw my Sammy aside as if he were a soiled glove, when he proposed to her? I'll have my revenge on her, or my name is not Pettigrew!"

"Um! I see your game," said Lestrangle thoughtfully; "but it strikes me that it's a precious risky one. What is to prevent Taybridge from going back to Claverley and telling it all to Kate? He'll find out it's all a mare's nest, and you'll only be laughed at for your pains."

"It is a risky game, true enough. But beggars cannot be choosers. I mean to stop this marriage, and you have got to help me."

"Good; I am ready enough, if you make it worth my while. But I don't see how you're to do it."

"Listen to me, Lestrangle. I've asked Taybridge to dine with me to-night. After dinner you will come, and you will not only back up what I've told him, but you will have heard from your daughter all about her cousin's goings-on with that secretary fellow in Scotland. Do you see?"

Lestrangle broke into a sardonic smile.

"Yes, I begin to see your game. I think I can make out a pretty good case. I've heard something of the proceedings; and a little embellishment will make them look very pretty—very pretty."

"You think you can manage it, do you?" asked Ebenezer.

"Oh yes, I can manage it fast enough. Sapphira has told me all about it—the walks, the talks, the dances, the picnics. Oh yes, we've a very good case. Then there were the theatricals—the rehearsals give plenty of opportunity for spooning. And then, by Jove! I was nearly forgetting. What do you say if that secretary had the impudence to kiss her at the supper after the play?"

"You don't mean that?" cried Ebenezer excitedly.

"But I do mean it. I don't think Miss Sapphira liked that kiss much. I fancy she was a bit taken with the secretary herself. Those ugly girls are always giving their love where it isn't wanted. But I remember it all now; and if out of that kiss I can't make mischief, it's a pity."

"Oh, what a chance! what a glorious chance! How can I be grateful enough to Providence?" exclaimed Pettigrew piously.

"Yes, it seems as if you had the devil's own luck," answered Aubrey cynically. "Anyway, you may be sure that I shall have a capital story for the excellent Taybridge to-night."

"Well, then, the chances are that Taybridge will be so disgusted that he won't see Lady Kate again, but will simply write breaking off the engagement. If he does see her, probably he'll offend her, for she has a violent and most unchristian temper, and anyway the marriage may be postponed. If only it doesn't take place before the twentieth of February, they may marry as fast as they like afterwards. We shall have to trust to a chapter of accidents in any case. But stop that wedding I will, by hook or by crook."

Lestrangle took a meditative turn up and down the room.

"Yes, I don't think you can do better. The chances are,

as you say, that Taybridge will write—but anyway there will be a violent quarrel, which it won't be easy to patch up. Still you must remember there are powerful influences at work on the Clare side to bring off the match; so I should not be too sanguine, if I were you."

"I won't be too sanguine," replied Ebenezer; "but I intend to have my revenge on that stuck-up minx. So you need not be squeamish as to what you say of her."

"All right! I've one or two little scores to pay off myself. My charming niece has not been too cousinly to Sapphira, you understand, and I am a tender-hearted father."

Ebenezer assented with an unctuous smile; and, after settling the hour for Aubrey's intervention, departed, leaving the latter to meditate over the turn things had taken, and to form schemes for the express purpose of extracting the greatest possible advantage to himself. At present it seemed as if loyalty to Pettigrew was the most profitable plan; but if the course of his reflections proved the contrary, Lestrangle would have no scruples in throwing over his accomplice in this nefarious business.

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE RECKLESSNESS OF CAUTION

TIME passed pleasantly enough at Claverley Castle during the absence of Lord Taybridge. Kate's affection for him was not of that ardent nature which abhors as a vacuum every moment not filled with the presence of the beloved. She was quite as happy without her lover as with him—if not more so; a state of mind which offers passive rather than active enjoyment to the sons and daughters of men. But Lord Claverley was radiant; his heart's desire seemed at last within his grasp. His daughter would be married within the limit of time appointed by Mrs. MacBalloch, and so would secure that lady's enormous fortune for the renovation and sustenance of the Claverley estates. And the old title would not be swallowed up by a new one, as he had feared when Lord Taybridge appeared upon the carpet; since that obliging young nobleman had so considerately offered his problematical second son to stand between extinction and the noble house of Clare.

Lord Claverley was extremely grateful to his future son-in-law for this concession. It had always been his dread that Kate would marry a peer of higher rank than himself, and so merge the Claverley title in a newer and less distinguished one; and he incautiously confided this feeling of gratitude to the wife of his bosom.

“Henrietta, I consider that Taybridge has shown himself a gentleman—a thorough gentleman—in agreeing to settle the Claverley title and estates upon Kate's second son. I am grateful—exceedingly grateful—to him for showing me and my house this consideration.”

But Lady Claverley's countenance was forbidding. "Are you?" was all she said.

"I am, my love, I am. I cannot tell you what a joy it is to me, who have no son of my own, to feel that my grandson will some day be Earl of Claverley."

"Claverley," replied his wife sternly, "I don't call this at all nice talk."

"But, my love, I should not mention such a thing to anybody but you—I should not indeed," urged the offender.

"I am the last person to listen to talk of that kind. I should have thought you'd have known that, after being married to me for over thirty years."

"Really, Henrietta, I did not mean to pain you in any way—I did not indeed."

"I am not pained—I'm shocked."

"I meant no harm, my love—no harm at all. I only just wanted to mention to you my appreciation of what I consider Taybridge's most generous conduct in a somewhat delicate matter."

"In a somewhat indelicate matter, would be nearer the mark."

The Earl became humble and contrite. "I am grieved—very grieved—that you should consider me wanting in refinement, my dear Henrietta."

"Then you shouldn't *be* wanting in refinement. You should never *be* things if you don't want me to *think* you them," replied the offended wife, with more clearness of thought than of expression.

Lord Claverley made one brave struggle for independence, for the which all men—all married men, that is to say—should honour him. "The bare truth can never be unrefined, my dear Henrietta—never."

"You can't often hear it then, if you think that."

"But, my love, artists will all tell you that the absence of drapery is always in good taste; it is only insufficient drapery that is wanting in refinement."

"Then why do they use insufficient drapery?" cried Lady Claverley triumphantly. "They condemn themselves out of their own mouths."

"Well, my love, I repeat that it is a great relief to my mind—an immense and unexpected relief—that Taybridge has consented to settle the Claverley title and estates upon Kate's sec——"

"Claverley, if you mention that child again I shall leave the room."

"But, Henrietta, I was only saying——"

"I don't care; I won't have him referred to in my presence."

The Earl's manful struggle was over; he was humble and contrite once more. "But, my love, may not I even say——"

"No, you mayn't. I won't have it. It is the sort of thing poor dear mamma would very much have objected to."

"*Honi soit qui mal y pense.* You forget the origin of the most noble Order of the Garter, my dear Henrietta."

"No, I don't; you've told me about it such scores of times. I only wish I could, and then the story would seem fresher! But, all the same, I don't see that talking Latin about it was any excuse for the lady's not having fastened her things on properly before she went out."

"It was not Latin, my love; it was French."

"It was what *I* call Latin," replied Lady Claverley, with an air of finality which no one—no man, that is to say—would have dared to dispute. "Besides," she continued, "if it had been a nice thing to say, it would have been said in English. I've often noticed that what can't be said in English had better not be said at all."

"But, my love, you will not allow me to refer even in English to the subject that is nearest to my heart at present, namely my delight in the thought that the title which has so long been borne by my ancestors will in turn be borne by my dear daughter's——"

"Claverley, haven't I asked you to drop the subject?"



"Certainly, my love, certainly; and I will do so finally after I have once more expressed my thankfulness that Kate's——"

"Claverley, drop that child—drop it at once—or I shall decline to continue the conversation."

"Nevertheless, Henrietta, I can assure you that such matters are freely dealt with by lawyers in marriage-settlements and documents of that kind."

"I don't care. If lawyers are coarse-minded, that's no reason why you should be."

"I see nothing coarse-minded about it, my love; I do not indeed."

"I've always thought it coarse-minded to mention people that aren't born; and I always shall," persisted the Countess, with a mind conscious of right. "Besides there are plenty of people in the world that *are* born; and I consider it much nicer-minded to talk about them, and to let the others alone."

"*De mortuis nil nisi bonum*; you would alter the proverb and turn it into 'Say nothing against those that are unborn,'" remarked Lord Claverley, taking refuge in mild sarcasm.

"It isn't so much that I object to your saying anything against them, Claverley; I object to your talking about them at all. Besides, when you come to think of it, I don't see what you could say against them exactly, for they can't have done much harm; they haven't had time."

"Certainly, my love, they have not. There I am quite at one with you. It is obviously impossible that the Claverley estates should as yet have been gambled away, or even mismanaged, by the individual whose name I am forbidden to mention."

"You aren't forbidden to mention his name, Claverley, because you can't possibly know it. And ten to one if you did, you'd find he was a girl. They so often are; especially when there are titles about." And Lady Claverley sighed.

Her husband took courage. "Then I do know his name;

for if I had anything to do with the choosing of it, it would be Henrietta!" he said, with a courtly bow.

"Claverley, don't talk about him. I won't have it."

"But, my love, you yourself were talking about him."

"No, I wasn't. I only said that very likely he'd be a girl; and that wasn't talking about him at all, but about his sister," replied the Countess triumphantly. She was never beaten.

Lord Claverley at once subsided. The experience of life had taught him the wisdom and comfort of this course.

In due time the Marquis of Taybridge returned from the scene of his directorial duties in order to press his suit with Lady Kate; but before he proceeded to the more pleasing extremities of courtship, he felt it necessary to have a word with his lady-love concerning the charges brought against her by Messrs. Pettigrew and Lestrange.

"I want to have an explanation from you regarding a certain matter," he began, with his usual blundering caution, "as a man cannot be too particular respecting the conduct of the lady he proposes to make his wife."

Signs of storm began to show in Kate's eyes at once. If accepting a man gave him the right to say such things as this to her, she would go on refusing offers till the end of her days, in spite of all the Wills in Somerset House. She did not answer, but began to hum *Sound the Loud Timbrel* under her breath.

Emboldened by her comparative silence, Taybridge continued: "A little bird has told me—that is to say, it has been conveyed to my ears in a roundabout and confidential manner—that there have been certain passages between yourself and the late Mrs. MacBalloch's secretary—or was it her agent? I cannot at the moment exactly recall which; but whichever it was has no bearing upon the point of my remark."

Still Kate did not reply. Her only sign of animation was to change the *motif* of her present fantasia from *Sound the Loud Timbrel* into *Rousseau's Dream*.

“Now it is very important, my dear Katharine, very important indeed, that a future Duchess should have no romances in the past to divert her from the fulfilment of her social duties. Besides, in her exalted position, she should be, like Cæsar’s wife—or was it the Pope’s? I really forget which, but I know it was the wife of some very leading Roman—above suspicion. I cannot at the moment recall exactly which it was, though the principle is the same in either case. Still, now I come to think of it, it must have been Cæsar’s, because the Pope is always a single man. Yes, the Duchess of Deeside should be above suspicion, as Cæsar’s wife and my mother have always been.”

Then at last Kate gave tongue. “Unworthy is the head that wears the strawberry leaves! That would never do, would it, Lord Taybridge?”

“Certainly not; I am glad that you catch my point so quickly. But you and I have always been kindred—or, if not exactly kindred, at any rate friendly and familiar—spirits; and have seen things from the same—or if not exactly from an identical, at any rate from a similar—point of view. Therefore I feel convinced you will have no objection to explaining to me in detail exactly what took place between yourself and Mrs. MacBalloch’s secretary or agent, as the case may be, and leaving me to decide whether your behaviour in this matter was such as would induce me to hesitate before making you Marchioness of Taybridge.”

By that time Kate’s blood was fairly up. “I shall do nothing of the kind,” she said.

Her suitor looked at her in amazement. “I don’t quite follow you, Katharine.”

“Probably not. I’m going the other way.”

“Do you mean to say that you decline to offer me any explanation of this matter—that you insist in withholding from me all accurate information as to what actually took place between yourself and Mrs. MacBalloch’s agent—or was it her secretary?”

And the prospective bridegroom drew himself up with an air of indignant surprise. Unfortunately his noble gesture was entirely thrown away upon the impenitent offender.

"I absolutely decline to offer any explanation of my conduct either to you or to anybody else."

"But, my dear Katharine, consider—pray consider. Think how important—I might almost say how necessary—it is that the future Duchess of Deeside—my wife, my mother's successor—should be like Pilate's wife—or didn't we agree it was Cæsar's?—above suspicion. It would never, never do for any secretary or agent or anybody of that kind to be on familiar terms with the Marchioness of Taybridge."

Kate was in a royal rage—as, indeed, she had every right to be. "I decline to explain anything," she said, with her usual toss of the head.

"Still, I must tell you that it was said—I am not at liberty to mention my authority, and I feel I can trust you to regard what I say as in the strictest confidence—that you kissed—yes, actually kissed—Mrs. MacBalloch's secretary, if not her agent; and I must beg of you, Katharine, as my future wife, to explain away that kiss."

Once more Katharine firmly declined to do anything of the kind.

"But you can see for yourself that there must be some explanation," Taybridge still pleaded, as if he were trying to account for the mysteries of a haunted house by natural causes; "to be embraced is not among the duties of either a secretary or an agent; they are expected to receive rents, not kisses; therefore an occurrence so unusual must be explained away. Otherwise I am sure it would make my mother most uncomfortable."

"I can't for the life of me see where your mother comes in. Nobody suggested that anybody's secretary ever kissed her, so I don't know what on earth she has to do with the matter."

"My dear Katharine, I should regard it as a breach—a dis-

tinct breach—of the Fifth Commandment, if I allowed my mother to remain in the dark with regard to any of your thoughts or actions. I can assure you she would feel it most acutely if I attempted to keep any of your faults or failings from her. Besides, it would be of no use; she would discover them all for herself, and would never rest until she did.”

Kate was furious. “My faults and failings are no business of the Duchess’s, and never will be.”

“There I cannot agree with you, Katharine—I cannot, indeed. It will be my business to correct those faults and failings; and how can I do so without my mother’s help and advice? I have never been a woman—my mother has; therefore she will understand the training of a wife far better than I could, and will be of the greatest—I may say the most invaluable—assistance to me.”

“Well, I shan’t listen to a single word she says; and I shall go out of my way to disobey every one of them. So there!” said Kate, with a stamp of her foot.

“Then you will make a great—I might even go so far as to say a culpable—mistake; for I can imagine no one more fitted than my mother to advise and counsel her juniors, and to teach the young idea how to fish—or is it to shoot? I really forget at the moment the exact words of the quotation—but whatever it is, my mother is just the woman to teach the young idea how to do it, and to do it properly.”

“She shall never teach me,” persisted Kate.

“And then,” continued Taybridge, waxing eloquent on his theme, “she sets such a good example to all young wives, she is so cautious, so discreet. If, as Solomon says, a fair woman without discretion is like a jewel of gold in a swine’s snout, my mother is like the swine’s snout with no jewel in it at all, she is so exactly the opposite of the other lady. You would never find *her* kissing an agent; my father wouldn’t like it.”

“Neither would the agent,” replied Kate, with some rudeness—but not, it must be admitted, without some provocation also.

Taybridge, however, was impervious. That anyone should dare to speak disrespectfully of the Duchess of Deeside was a thing undreamed of in his philosophy; so it never occurred to him to resent the impossible. "Therefore," he went on, "I can imagine no one more suited than my mother to counsel and correct my wife."

"She can counsel and correct your wife as much as you like," retorted Kate; "but she shall never counsel and correct me."

"But, my dear Katharine, the one thing involves the other. When you and I are married, whatever affects my wife will necessarily—I might almost say inevitably—affect you."

"Not a bit of it. Your future wife and I are—and always will be—two totally different people."

"In what way? I do not entirely catch your meaning."

"In every way. For one thing she will be a fool; I am not."

Taybridge looked more puzzled than ever. "How do you know that she will be a fool?"

"Her marriage alone will prove it."

"But, my dear Katharine, you are my future wife; and as you are—according to your own confession—not a fool, my future wife cannot be a fool, since you and she are one and the same person. The thing is obvious."

"There's only one thing that is obvious, and that is that nothing on earth could ever induce me to marry you."

"Stay, stay, Katharine, you misunderstand me—you completely misunderstand me. Although I cannot deny that I object—I may say I strongly object—to the fact that any love-passages, whether including a kiss or otherwise, have ever passed between Mrs. MacBalloch's secretary—or was it Mrs. MacBalloch's agent?—and yourself, I do not on that account propose to break off our engagement. Kisses between persons of opposite sexes are always—or almost always—a mistake; and even if they do not amount to

positive errors, they are an absurd and unnecessary waste of time. Nevertheless I do not consider that just one kiss (I understood from Mr. Lest—I mean from my anonymous informant—that one was the maximum) is sufficient to render you unfit to step into my mother's shoes, if you will explain the circumstances and will promise that such an incident shall never occur again."

Kate again tossed her head with the old gesture. "The boot is on the other leg, Lord Taybridge; it is I that am declining to step into your mother's shoes—not you who are forbidding me to do so. You must look elsewhere for the Cinderella who will be able to adorn those magic slippers and walk circumspectly in them. They are much too narrow for me."

Taybridge started as if he had been shot. "Surely, surely, I cannot have heard you aright. You cannot mean to say that you are thinking of breaking off our engagement."

"No, I am not thinking of it; I have already thought of it, and have come to a decision."

Real tears sprang into Taybridge's small grey eyes. "Look here, Katharine, do be reasonable."

"I won't be reasonable—nothing shall induce me to be reasonable—I wouldn't be reasonable for anything. *You* are reasonable, and it is the most detestable quality I ever came across."

The young man still pleaded. "But, my dear Katharine, you do not seem to understand that I am quite prepared to forgive you for that unfortunate kiss."

"I don't want you to forgive me; I wouldn't be forgiven for anything!"

"In fact, I'll go further. I won't ask you to explain it away at all. It shall just be forgotten."

"No, it shan't. I wouldn't forget it for worlds!"

"Look here, Kate, I'll go further still; I won't even mention it to my mother. I'm afraid in doing this I'm

guilty of a distinct breach of the Fourth—or wasn't it the Fifth?—Commandment; but I'll do even that for your sake." And a fearful and unhallowed joy filled the soul of Lord Taybridge as he ranked himself with that long list of sinful lovers who have considered not only this world, but also the next, well lost for love.

"I don't care. You can carry what tittle-tattle you like to your mother. It's nothing to me."

"But, Katharine, you don't mean that you won't marry me after all. You can't mean it. My mother—that is to say your father—fully expects it; they do indeed."

"Then my father—that is to say your mother—will be disappointed."

"And then," urged Taybridge, "there's Mrs. MacBalloch's Will. There isn't time to marry anybody else but me between now and the twentieth (or is it the fifteenth?—I never can remember whether it is six calendar or six lunar months) of February; and then you'll lose the MacBalloch property."

But Kate was reckless. "I don't care. I'd rather break stones on the road all day, and sleep in a pauper's grave all night, than marry a man who professes to love me, and who yet listens to the mean and malicious gossip that any tell-tale can pick up in the servants' hall. So there!"

In vain Taybridge pleaded and wept and entreated. It was of no use. He had offended Kate past forgiveness, and nothing would induce her to have any more to do with him. Her father and mother did all in their power to smooth things over, but she was too angry to listen to reason. So Lord Taybridge in his turn rode away; and Lady Katharine was once again left lonely and disengaged, with only three short weeks yet to run of the fatal six months.



## CHAPTER XXVI

### IT WAS A LOVER

IT was a strange thing that Lord Taybridge, forgetting his usual caution, omitted to try and stop the notice of his marriage in the *Times* and *Morning Post*. It is true that the paragraph had been sent by Lord Claverley, and appeared the day after Taybridge and Ebenezer Pettigrew had their fateful meeting. But the Marquis reproached himself for not visiting the newspaper office after he parted from Pettigrew in the morning, and asking for the notice to be postponed. Wherefore George Despard, reading his *Times* to the accompaniment of a quiet pipe after a solitary dinner at Ladyhall, came upon the interesting paragraph. Although he was not unprepared for some such intelligence, rumours of Taybridge's attentions to Lady Kate at Elnagar having reached him, it struck a cold chill to his heart. So this was the end of it all!—the natural end, but none the less grievous to him on that account. Why had he been such a fool as to succumb to the charms of this proud young beauty? He had done it with his eyes open. He should have followed his own better judgment, and kept clear of Kate and her wiles; he should never have consented to take part in the theatricals; above all he should have kept his head at the supper. What a fool he had been! Yet he did not repent; he loved her; she was the Queen of his life, and if she refused to occupy the throne, it should remain empty. One consolation remained to him; the property would be Kate's without any further trouble. Yes, it was better so.

Yet, as he sat and smoked, the devil stood up at his elbow,

and tempted him. He might stop this marriage, so he told himself, whether Kate would or no. As he considered the matter, his eye flashed, and he clenched his hands. Yes, he might bring this proud girl to his feet. Let him disclose what he believed was as yet known to himself alone, and he would be in a position to dictate terms. And why should he not do it? He had always kept it in reserve as a last resource. Then a better spirit came over him, and told him why not. If Kate had but loved him, everything would have been well. But she did not love him. If she chose, of her own free will, to marry a Taybridge to secure her fortune, that was her business; he, at least, would not be a party to any such transaction—but he would not use his knowledge to prevent the marriage if she wished it.

A few days later Despard set out to visit a distant property which required his presence. As a result he missed seeing the paragraph announcing that the marriage would not take place, which duly appeared. His business took him some days, and on his return to Ladyhall he was startled to find awaiting him a despairing letter from Lord Claverley, informing him of the frustration of his daughter's marriage with Lord Taybridge, and going on to say that, as a compliance with the terms of Mrs. MacBalloch's Will was now out of the question, Mr. Despard had better make arrangements for carrying out the alternative disposition of the property. George read this letter with mingled feelings, prominent among which was a sudden gush of hope which sent the blood surging through his veins, and which conquered the pride and resentment which still tried to retain the mastery. But his resolution was quickly taken—his portmanteau packed with equal rapidity; and in an hour he was driving along the road to St. Columba's, as fast as his dogcart could carry him, to catch the night-mail south. There was no sleep for George Despard that night. As the train swiftly pursued its course southward his mind was busily engaged in maturing his plan of campaign. Pride and

resentment again began to hold up their heads, and hope had to arrange a compromise with them, and had much the worst of the bargain in the resulting treaty.

It was therefore no cheerful lover, but a morose, determined man, intent on doing justice, but by no means on tempering justice with mercy, that entered Claverley Castle on February the seventeenth, three days before the fatal date.

“Ah, Mr. Despard, is it you?” cried the Earl when he was announced. “I am glad to welcome you once again. It is probably the last time—yes, almost certainly the last time—that I shall have the pleasure of receiving you as a guest in the house of my ancestors. Let us be merry while we may! let us be merry while we may!”

Lord Claverley, unlike Mr. Pecksniff, had not an ancient captain’s biscuit wherewith to indulge in festivity; but he shook George’s hand with cordiality. But George noted with a pang of pity how shaky was the hand that clasped his own.

“Let us hope,” he said, with unaffected sympathy, “that matters are not so bad as they seem.”

“Nothing can avail now, my dear sir, nothing,” replied the Earl, with a mournful shake of the head. “You know, none better, the terms of the Will. And why should I conceal from an excellent friend like yourself that my affairs are embarrassed, seriously embarrassed?”

“Come, come, Claverley,” cried the Countess, “don’t be so downhearted. When things are at their worst they generally begin to mend; and even if they don’t, one has to show a little spirit and make the best of them—as you are always preaching to me whenever Charles gives notice. You are very fond of telling me that there are as good footmen in the sea as ever came out of it, and various little comforting things of that kind; and now, my love, do try and bear your own troubles as cheerfully as you bear mine, and with as much sound wisdom. Poor dear mamma always said that it was bad manners to fret over things and make a fuss, and I think

she was quite right. And there is no need for all this good-byeing with Mr. Despard, as if we were never going to see him again. Even if we have to let the Castle, I am sure he will still come and see us wherever we are." And her ladyship's knitting-needles clicked quite cheerfully.

George assured the Earl that this was the case.

"I am sorry that you should have had the trouble of so long a journey. As things are, we have no longer any interest in the property, so that all arrangements are independent of our consent or convenience. And may I add that it is some satisfaction that a portion of my lamented kinswoman's property will fall to the lot of one who is so thoroughly worthy of it?"

And Lord Claverley made his courtliest bow.

Despard acknowledged the Earl's kindness, but said that he had come because he had a suggestion to offer and a proposal to make, which he hoped might be acceptable to Lady Katharine and her father, and which might smooth away the difficulties to which the Earl had referred. Might Lady Katharine be asked to join in the discussion?

Both Lord and Lady Claverley were not a little astonished at this speech, and as George positively declined to explain himself except in the presence of their daughter, she was sent for.

George and Kate met as two duellists might have saluted one another on the field of battle—with the most distinguished politeness, but with defiance flashing from their eyes. An odd caprice of memory brought to George's mind Sir Anthony's description of Lydia Languish—"lovely even in sullenness"; but it cut him to the heart to see on her face the sadness which competed with proud indifference for possession. As for Kate, she wondered what brought this intrusive secretary there. Was she never to be rid of his interference? Lady Claverley had told her that he had some suggestion or proposal to make. She remembered how at Ladyhall he had

vowed that in any event the money should be hers. Well, he would soon see how futile such vows were. She must get through the interview as best she might, she thought, with a weary sigh, and then perhaps she might have peace—or if not peace, at least cessation from the war of conflicting desires and incompatible possibilities of which she was so weary, so weary.

There was an awkward pause. It was not easy to say what he had to say, and George felt it so.

“Now, my dear sir,” began the Earl, “my daughter is here, and we are prepared to listen to any suggestion you have to make.” And the Earl leaned back in his chair with his hands in his favourite attitude.

“A few minutes ago, Lord Claverley, you spoke in terms which were more than kind as to the possibility of my becoming possessed of part of my benefactress’s money. Will you let me say that I was brought up on the distinct understanding that I was not to expect a fortune, and that the five hundred a year left to me was more than I ever supposed would fall to my lot? Do not think me priggish when I say that I have no wish for more for myself. Again, I know that Mrs. MacBalloch intended Lady Katharine to be her heir, and that the proviso made was solely put in to secure her early marriage—that being a point on which Mrs. MacBalloch held strong views.”

“That may be so,” put in the Earl, “but it does not alter the legal effect.”

“No, but it does the moral. Neither I nor Mr. Pettigrew have any claim on this property. I cannot speak for Mr. Pettigrew, nor for the share that may fall to his lot. But, for myself, I wish to say that I will not touch a penny of what will become legally but not morally mine in three days’ time.”

“But, my dear sir, you cannot help touching it,” cried the Earl.

"Yes, I can," retorted Despard. "I am prepared to execute a deed, transferring it to you as trustee for Lady Katharine, and in so doing I shall be only carrying out the wishes of my benefactress."

"That is very noble of you," interposed Lady Kate scornfully, "a very fine piece of play-acting. Do you suppose for a moment that I would touch your money?"

"Gently, my child, gently," said her father, with mild reproof, "you are too impetuous. It is a most generous proposal on the part of Mr. Despard, as you will, I am sure, acknowledge. But, of course, it is out of the question for you to accept it."

Here Lady Claverley interposed. "Don't be in too great a hurry, my love. If Mr. Despard is so kind as to make this offer, we owe him the courtesy at any rate to consider it."

"My dear Henrietta, do you suppose that my pride would ever allow me to accept, either for myself or my daughter, money to which we are not legally entitled?"

"I was not thinking of your pride at the moment, Claverley; I was thinking of Mr. Despard's. As he has just told you, he is too proud to take money to which he is not morally entitled; and his pride is as worthy of consideration as yours. There is no copyright in pride, as far as I know; yet everybody seems to think that there is, and that they alone hold it."

"Thank you, Lady Claverley," cried George, "for looking at the matter from my point of view."

"I see exactly how it strikes you, Mr. Despard, as I see exactly how it strikes my husband; and I also see how difficult it is for either of you to enter into the other's feelings. I have always noticed that the prouder people are themselves, the less they respect other people's pride; just as the more sensitive they are themselves, the less they regard other people's feelings."

"I am sorry to differ from my wife on so vital a matter," said Lord Claverley, turning to George; "but, all the same,

I do not as yet see my way to accept your most generous—your most noble proposal.”

Lady Claverley noted the words “as yet,” and knew that, so far as her husband was concerned, the victory was hers; so she held her peace and went on with her knitting. She knew both when to speak and when to keep silence.

George bowed. “Then I am afraid, Lord Claverley, I must trouble you with something else. Lady Katharine will bear me out when I tell you that directly the contents of the will were known I offered to marry her, in order that her title to the money might be clear. She was pleased to attribute my proposal to mercenary motives. But it was not so. I have no reason to conceal the truth. I love her; love her so much that her happiness is the one thing I care for. It was no sacrifice that I was proposing a few minutes ago. I know well enough that she detests me. So be it. But it is only selfishness on my part which wants to make her happy in her own way.”

Despard paused a moment, and then went on defiantly, almost arrogantly, “I, too, as Lady Claverley has said, have my pride. I, too, refuse to touch this money. Yes, my Lady Katharine, I remember how you accused me of scheming to get this fortune for myself——”

“You might also remember,” panted Kate, “that I begged your pardon.”

“It is true,” said George, softening for a moment, “and I received your apology churlishly. I regret it. But let us come to business. If propriety or decorum, or whatever you like to call it, forbids you to accept the money in the way I have suggested, it can be done in another way.”

“In Heaven’s name, how?” cried the Earl excitedly.

Despard was very quiet now; he spoke in a low, deliberate, almost indifferent tone, which effectually masked the passion it was so hard to suppress.

“I am prepared to renew the offer I made to Lady Katharine at Ladyhall. Wait,” he went on, as Kate rose

with an indignant refusal, ready to burst forth: "wait until I have finished. I love you, and would give my life to win your love, but I have no desire to live with a woman who detests me, and who would regard my presence with loathing. The proposal I make is that you should marry me, and so secure to yourself the whole of Mrs. MacBalloch's handsome fortune; there is still time to get a special licence. Then I will leave you directly the ceremony is over, and go out of your life altogether. I have sufficient for my small wants; and in another country I may seek, and perhaps find, oblivion. You need have no apprehension, for I swear you shall never set eyes on me again when once you are—my wife."

George ceased, and there was a dead silence. The clock went on ticking to the accompaniment of Lady Claverley's knitting-needles; there was the dull drip of the rain, and the sighing of the wind. From the alcove at the other end of the room there was a faint rustle, but no one heeded it.

At last Kate spoke. Her father gazed at her in undisguised agitation, but Lady Claverley maintained an unruffled calm, though she glanced quietly from time to time at her daughter.

"I suppose I ought to thank you for the considerate way in which you have offered to go out of my life—to use your own expression—the moment you have married me. But I am not your wife yet. Perhaps I was unjust to you a few minutes ago—as unjust as I was at Ladyhall; if so, I am sorry, and I ask your pardon. But as for the arrangement you have proposed, I can only thank you and simply say that I cannot agree to it."

"My child! my child!" cried the Earl in agonized accents, "you cannot mean what you say; you cannot be so cruel to your mother and myself as to refuse this proposal—this most generous, this most disinterested proposal. Henrietta, my love, speak to Kate and convince her how wrong she is, how utterly and cruelly wrong."

"Come, Claverley," replied his spouse, "you must really control yourself; you will be quite poorly if you go on like



this, and your dinner is certain to disagree with you, though it is only filleted soles and roast mutton. I always give orders for the dinner to be quite plain when you have anything on your mind. But even boiled chicken and semolina pudding would be too much for a man in your present excited condition. Let me speak quietly to Kate."

"It's no use, mother," said Kate, while George walked away to the window and looked out on the dripping trees and the distant fog that was creeping over the valley. He had done his part, and did not wish to share in the discussion.

"Come, Kate, it's no use being silly; there isn't time. Mr. Despard has made a very considerate proposal, and I, for one, shall duly consider it. You can please yourself; but I must say I think it is rude of you to refuse at once without properly thinking it over. I don't at all approve of husbands and wives officially separating; it always makes people shy of calling on the wife, and is generally unpleasant. But there is no reason for them to see more of each other than they want, as long as they don't let the world know how little that is. Of course the idea of Mr. Despard going away with nothing but his own little legacy is absurd; but I don't see why he shouldn't take his proper share of the money as your husband, and then enjoy himself in his own way—shoot big game, or go into Parliament, or do any of the other dull things that amuse men. Of course, he would make Claverley Castle his headquarters so as to avoid gossip; but he needn't be here more than he wished, though, for my part, I should always be delighted to see him for as long as he cared to stay. As for you, you would just enjoy yourself in the usual way with your father and me, but without any of this horrid worry. As far as I can see, the only difference it would make to either of you would be that you couldn't marry anybody else; but as Mr. Despard is kind enough to forego that pleasure for your sake, and as you don't seem to care about it, I don't think that need stand in your way."

But Kate still refused, though a keen observer might have

detected a touch of indecision in her manner after her mother's lengthy oration. Despard, at least, thought so, and came to the conclusion that it was the psychological moment for leaving them to discuss the matter in private.

Then followed a scene in which the Earl begged and besought his daughter, with tears, to pity his old age; and in which the Countess plied her with the finest of common sense. Kate struggled and struggled, but at last yielded. And the Earl, with tears of thankfulness, was enabled to inform Despard that his daughter had agreed to the marriage, but that his proposition must be modified by the omission of the stipulation that the bridegroom should be at liberty to depart immediately the ceremony was concluded. Such a departure the Earl rightly characterized as melodramatic, and therefore objectionable. Moreover, Mr. Despard's very praiseworthy desire to cause Lady Katharine as little annoyance as possible might be gratified in a more reasonable if less romantic manner. If he consented to keep up appearances before the world, he need see as little of his wife as either he or she could desire.

George was naturally proud of his scheme—not only with the pardonable pride of paternity, but because it seemed to his heated imagination to be a distinctly fine course of action worthy of an heroic occasion. Wherefore he fought a gallant fight in its favour; and for a time it seemed as though the negotiations were doomed to end in failure. But Lord Claverley having brought all his diplomacy into play without success, invoked, as he invariably had to do in his difficulties, the aid of his wife. The Countess told Despard plainly that she could only consent to the marriage on these terms; whereon George, finding he could effect his purpose in no other way, capitulated.

Lady Kate had retired to her own rooms, and declined to see her prospective husband again that night; so the high contracting parties were enabled to settle the terms of the treaty at their leisure. It was decided for George to go up to town the next day for the purpose of obtaining the Arch-

bishop's licence enabling them to dispense with the ordinary legal delays regarding time and place. He was to carry with him a letter from the Earl detailing the circumstances of the case, for the alleviation of any doubt or scruple on His Grace's part. Meanwhile the Earl was to see the Rector and make arrangements for the wedding to take place in the drawing-room at the Castle—after the Scotch fashion. It was calculated that Despard would get back on the morning of the nineteenth, so that they could be married in the afternoon.

When these preliminaries were finally settled, Lord Claverley breathed a deep sigh of relief; and even the Countess, though outwardly she had maintained her usual placidity, felt as though a load were lifted off her mind. What Lady Kate thought of the matter, as she sat in her room with tightened lips, and dry eyes which glittered fiercely, and a dull ache at her heart, who shall say? As for George, he made his simple preparations for his visit to town with a dreary feeling of despair. It was all very well to form heroic resolves and to offer noble propositions, yet he could not conceal from himself that he loved Kate better than ever—that his adoration of her, with all her faults, was an overmastering passion: and he did not know how he should bear to marry her and yet treat her with the distant courtesy of a comparative stranger. His pride had won the day, and not for the first time he felt how hollow such a victory was.

But the Earl's complacency would have been ruffled, and the pæans of self-congratulation which he sang in the presence of the wife of his bosom would have been turned to a *Miserere* if he had only known the meaning of that rustle from the alcove which had disturbed the dead silence in the drawing-room that afternoon. That evening Sapphira had one of her frequent headaches, and did not appear at dinner. But a message flashed along the telegraph wires which sent Aubrey Lestrangle with a very disturbed face to commune with Ebenezer Pettigrew on the strange events of the day.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE SPECIAL LICENCE

MR. PETTIGREW was seated in a comfortable arm-chair in his library, enjoying an excellent cigar after a copious dinner. He was at peace with gods and men, and an expression of the most perfect content overspread his smug countenance. Had he not reason for satisfaction? Were not all things working together for his own personal good? Had not the Powers Above recognized his sterling worth, and were They not prospering his handiwork? Yes: Mr. Pettigrew was bubbling over with gratification. His prompt action had averted the danger arising from the proposed Taybridge alliance: Mr. Pettigrew shuddered whenever he thought of how great that danger had been; but the shudder turned into a blissful complacency when he recalled his own prompt action and its immediate success. Only two days more! Then the fortune—at least the most considerable portion of the fortune—would be his. Surely nothing could happen to dash the cup from his lips at the last moment. No; Mr. Pettigrew felt secure at last. Wherefore he smoked his cigar and sipped his coffee at peace with gods and men.

Alas for the vanity of human wishes! Mr. Pettigrew's complacency was destined to be disturbed, and that too in a way which was calculated to make him forswear those Powers Above with whom he was at the present moment on such friendly, not to say familiar, terms. The bell rang, and it ought to have pealed with a sinister clang—but unfortunately it was of another type; and electricity, with all its marvellous

powers, does not lend itself to subtle shades of meaning in the commonplace ringing of the domestic bell. Ebenezer had no apprehension when the servant announced, "A gentleman to see you, sir." He was, indeed, a little annoyed that the comfortable processes of digestion should be disturbed, and rose with some discontent to greet his visitor. But a glance at Aubrey Lestrangle's face was sufficient to tell him that something serious had happened.

"*You*, Lestrangle," he faltered, "there's nothing wrong?"

Aubrey waited until the door was safely closed.

"Wrong?" he growled. "Well, that's as may be! If you want the MacBalloch estate—and if I'm to have my commission—there's something very wrong indeed. Read that!"

And Aubrey held out the telegram he had received from his daughter. Ebenezer took it with a shaking hand, and having grasped its contents fell back in his chair in a state of total collapse.

"What cursed luck!" he muttered when in a measure he had recovered himself; "to be so near, and then to lose it all!" And he dropped his head into his hands and sobbed convulsively.

"Look here, Pettigrew," snarled Lestrangle roughly, "this is no time for whimpering. We must act."

"But what can we do?" asked Pettigrew, wringing his hands. "It is no good trying any cock-and-bull story on any of them."

"Not the slightest good in the world," agreed Lestrangle heartily.

"Then what can be done? He'll get the licence."

Lestrangle lowered his voice. "He may get the licence, but——" and he hesitated for a moment, "but he must not be allowed to leave London with it in his pocket."

"But how can he be kept here? You can't prevent a man from leaving London if he wants to."

"Can't I?" growled Lestrangle. "I tell you he shan't leave

London before the twentieth, and I shall not be very particular as to the means I use."

"Oh! but Lestrangle," cried Ebenezer in terror, "I can never permit any violence."

"Who spoke of violence?" sneered Lestrangle. "No; we won't have any violence. Still he must be kept here. Look you, Pettigrew, this is no kid-glove business we have before us. I intend to get that money, and I'm not the man to be stopped by any nervous fears on your part. Bless you, man, I know enough of you to ruin you, and unless you do just as I tell you in this matter, by Heaven, ruin you I will!"

Ebenezer gazed with growing dismay and a sickening dread at Lestrangle. He was ready to swindle legally the widow and the fatherless without the slightest compunction; but the bare idea of doing anything which might bring him within the clutches of the law filled him with horror. He struggled feebly, wriggling like a worm on the fatal hook, but all in vain. The stronger villain had his way; and Pettigrew, with many a qualm not of conscience, but of deadly apprehension, agreed to Lestrangle's bold scheme. They sat till a late hour maturing their plans, and then Lestrangle departed, not without many a threat of dire consequence should his accomplice deviate a hair's breadth from the allotted course. Ebenezer was left alone—his wife and children were away on a visit—alone with his fears. He took a stiff glass of brandy and water—he was by no means at peace either with gods or men. Yes; he felt that brandy—he was not so certain as to the water—was decidedly necessary at this crisis in his affairs.

The next morning George Despard, on arriving at Paddington, was surprised to encounter Mr. Pettigrew on the platform. Although not intimate with him, he had necessarily come into contact with him since Mrs. MacBalloch's death. There was no love lost between them, for Mr. Pettigrew grudged the share which would fall to Despard's lot if the property had to be divided, while the latter saw through Ebenezer's sancti-

monious hypocrisy, and had a proper contempt for him. Still on the journey George had been wondering how best to convey the news of the surprising turn which had taken place to the heir-at-law, and had felt a certain amount of good-natured pity for the disappointment that was awaiting this excellent gentleman. He was therefore a little surprised at the cordial greeting he received; Pettigrew rushed at him with extended hand.

"My dear Mr. Despard, who would have thought of seeing you? I came here expecting to meet a friend from Oxford—but it seems he has not come. Business affairs, my dear sir, business affairs."

"Glad to see you, Mr. Pettigrew. In fact I have some important matters to mention to you."

"Ah! about the MacBalloch estate, I suppose. However, I can't stop to discuss matters now. I have a most important directors' meeting, which I must attend."

"But I thought you were meeting——"

"True, true," interrupted Pettigrew hastily, "he's a fellow-director, and I wanted to consult him on the way to the meeting."

"But I really must detain you a minute," said George.

"Impossible, my dear sir, quite impossible. But I tell you what; come and dine with me to-night. I am all alone, and then you can tell me all about it."

George thought a moment. He did not intend to return to Claverley that night, as he would have been in an awkward position there; so he might as well dine with Pettigrew as at his club.

"All right," he said, "if you can't stay now. I too have important business."

"Seven sharp, then!" cried Pettigrew, jumping into a hansom.

Despard had telegraphed to the Archbishop's secretary the night before to arrange a meeting. His Grace was fortunately

in town, so that due explanations having been furnished and Lord Claverley's letter having been delivered, Despard was enabled to go to Doctors' Commons and obtain the special licence.

This all took time ; but he found himself in due course at Mr. Pettigrew's door—with the precious document carefully secured in his pocket-book.

Ebenezer received his guest with a great show of cordiality, beneath which a careful observer might have detected considerable uneasiness. George, however, was less acute than usual in his perceptions—as was not unnatural in his present state of nervous tension ; no man is either a keen observer or a profound philosopher on the eve of his wedding-day. His host would have no business talk before the dinner, which was an excellent one, perhaps a little too elaborate for a *tête-à-tête* affair. The wines, too, were admirable, and Ebenezer was assiduous in urging his guest to prove their quality. George, however, was no toper, and contented himself with a very small modicum during dinner, and positively declined to take anything with his dessert.

In due time they found themselves in the smoking-room ; and when their cigars were well alight, Pettigrew at last allowed business matters to be touched upon.

"The eighteenth of February," he began, "only one day more, my dear sir, and I shall be able to congratulate you on possession of a handsome fortune ; while, as for myself——" he stopped and spread out his hands deprecatingly.

"I am afraid, Mr. Pettigrew, that there is a disappointment in store for you."

"My dear sir, I will try and bear any disappointment as a Christian should. I have what is sufficient for my own modest wants, as you see. A large fortune is a serious responsibility, which I by no means covet. But if They Who know better than we do see fit to place this burden upon my shoulders, so be it. I will strive to bear it without repining."



"I fear you do not understand me," said George, turning rather red. Too late, it occurred to him that it was rather cool to come to a man's house, eat an excellent dinner, and then announce to him that you are about to take a step which will deprive him of the chance of a great estate. Yes; it was decidedly a delicate matter that he had before him, and the heightened colour of his cheeks had every justification.

"Not understand you?" said Ebenezer, with oily smoothness. "Surely the matter needs no explanation. Lady Katharine will not be married—alas!—before the twentieth; it follows that you and I will be cursed with the cares of wealth."

George was not taken in by this affectation on Ebenezer's part; indeed, the man's fulsome hypocrisy sickened him, and went a long way towards soothing his somewhat disturbed conscience.

"That's just the mistake you make," he said curtly. "Lady Katharine *will* be married before the twentieth."

Mr. Pettigrew played his game with consummate skill.

"Ha! ha! ha!" he laughed, with admirably feigned sincerity, "you are referring to the silly affair with Lord Taybridge. There was some kind of an engagement, I admit; but it was broken off. And Lord Taybridge is not the man to go back on a decision of that kind. No—no! Lord Taybridge is a man of business, my dear sir, quite a man of business!"

And Mr. Pettigrew shook his head in pity for George's ignorance of the sterling commercial qualities of the heir of the Duke of Deeside.

"I wasn't thinking of Taybridge, Mr. Pettigrew," quoth George coolly; "I was thinking of myself. Lady Katharine, with the full approval of the Earl and Countess, has consented to marry me—and the wedding will take place to-morrow."

Mr. Pettigrew gave an admirable start of surprise.

"Marry *you*, Mr. Despard, *you*?"

And again he shook his head—this time with a subtle change indicative of sorrowful disapproval.

"Yes, me," replied George feebly, again painfully recalling the fact that he had eaten the good man's salt; "so I am afraid that your expectation of inheriting the property is disappointed."

Mr. Pettigrew fixed his eyeglasses firmly, and looked sternly at the culprit.

"While you, Mr. Despard, will share the plunder that those grasping aristocrats have secured for themselves through the folly of Katharine MacBalloch in penning that iniquitous Will."

Strange to stay, George felt extremely small. He knew that Pettigrew had not the slightest claim, moral or legal, to the money. He was quite alive to the man's greed and pharisaical self-righteousness. If he had been anywhere else he would have rejoiced at Ebenezer's discomfiture. Yet, being in the man's own house—he cursed his own folly in putting himself into this predicament—he felt just as if he had committed a mean action.

"I am very sorry for your disappointment," he began weakly.

"Say no more, my dear sir, say no more. I forgive you," quoth Mr. Pettigrew nobly. "May this gold—ill-gotten as it is—not turn into dust and ashes. Weep not for me. I have been blessed—yes, modestly blessed—and can keep the wolf from the door—the wolf from the door."

And Ebenezer wiped away an imaginary tear with a voluminous pocket-handkerchief. Suddenly he looked up.

"Dear, dear, you have had no coffee! This stuff is quite cold. I will ring for some fresh."

Coffee and liqueurs had been placed on a side-table, but in their conversation they had neglected them.

George protested that he did not care for coffee, and that he must be off; but Mr. Pettigrew insisted on having a fresh supply brought in. He proceeded to pour it out, and busied himself with the cups.

"Sugar, my dear sir? And a glass of chartreuse or cognac?"

Just a taste? No? How abstemious you are! Well, here is your coffee *au naturel*. I think I must have a little cognac myself."

Mr. Pettigrew again came to the conclusion that brandy was a necessity for his complaint; and the hand that poured it out was somewhat shaky.

Despard drained the cup, and thought to himself that the coffee was the one failure of the dinner. A curious taste—a very curious taste! More than that, he began to have a strange sensation as of giddiness.

"I must be getting back to my hotel," he said, and his voice was rather thick. "Will you ask your servant to call me a hansom?"

Despard began to feel more and more queer; and when his cab was announced (it was strange that there was one standing at the door) he had some difficulty in walking.

"A little over the mark," muttered Ebenezer to the servant, who seemed astonished; "a little over the mark. Help him into the cab."

Despard certainly needed assistance, and was no sooner in the cab than he fell back asleep.

The man gave the driver the address of George's hotel, and the hansom drove off at a rapid rate in that direction. But the route was changed as soon as the vehicle was well out of sight of Mr. Pettigrew's servants or their neighbours.

Ebenezer, alone in his study, was again in a state of collapse. He had played his part, and had played it well. But now he realized that it was done, and could not be undone. He tried to argue that it would be all right; that no one would suspect. But he had to have recourse more than once to the spirit-flask to keep up his courage.

An hour later Lestrangle called.

"Is it all right? Have you got it?" asked Pettigrew in trembling accents.

"Here you are," replied Lestrangle, with a triumphant air.

"His Grace's autograph will be of precious little use to our friend Despard and my Lady Kate."

"And is he all right? He is not dead, is he?" And Pettigrew could not conceal his agitation.

"Dead? Not a bit of it, but dead drunk at my lodgings, thanks to your capital cellar," grinned Aubrey. "At least that's how we shall describe it; and my excellent landlady is too much accustomed to little attacks of this sort on the part of her *clientèle* to ask any inconvenient questions. He'll probably have slept off the effects of this drug by this time to-morrow, and then it will be too late."

"But he will suspect us," cried Pettigrew.

"He may suspect you, certainly," said Lestrangle coldly; "but he won't recognize the cabby who drove him off, nor will your servant, my fine fellow—I was too well disguised for that."

"Oh! what shall I do, what shall I do?" moaned Ebenezer.

"I'll tell you what you shall do," replied Aubrey, "you shall draw a cheque for ten thousand pounds, payable to bearer."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," cried Pettigrew, aroused out of his fears by his indignation at this cool proposal. "You were to have a thousand on account, and the other nine when I came into possession."

"Now, my good fellow, it's no good your blustering. I'm going to have ten thousand down, and I intend to be across the Channel before Despard regains his senses, otherwise it may be unpleasant for you; as it was you who administered the drug, if you remember—not I."

Pettigrew begged and prayed, and cursed, and swore, all to no advantage.

Ten thousand pounds down Lestrangle insisted upon, under the threat of revealing the whole plot.

And he got it.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### THE NINETEENTH OF FEBRUARY

IT was the nineteenth of February ; and was, moreover, one of those typical February days which make the ordinary man and woman invariably quote the proverb about February filling the dyke either with black or white. First it rained, and then it snowed, and then it did both together. The thermometer was firmly seated on the fence of thirty-two, so that the atmosphere combined the disadvantages of a frost with the discomfort of a thaw in the most equal and impartial manner, and united the cold of thirty-one to the rawness of thirty-three with a power of amalgamation which was as wonderful as it was unpleasant. You would have said that it was too cold to be damp, and too damp to be cold, if you had not felt in the very marrow of your bones that it was both to the verge of excess. If you could resist the wet, the east wind found you out ; and if you could resist the east wind, the rain found you out : and so you were certain to catch cold one way or another, and it was better to make up your mind to it and quietly submit. It was the sort of day that was bound to get the better (or rather the worse) of everybody ; there was no possibility of resisting it ; it was armed at all points, and had no weak places in its panoply of hibernal discomfort.

And it was as miserable inside as it was out of doors at Claverley Castle on that memorable February day ; for the invisible and almost problematic sun had already passed its meridian, and there was no sign or news from George.

He was to have come down from town—with the special licence safe in his pocket—by the first train that morning; which would have brought him to Claverley Castle by mid-day; and yet it was now three o'clock in the afternoon, and he had neither come nor telegraphed.

What could it mean?

He knew as well as anybody that if Kate were not married before that day was over, the MacBalloch property could never be hers. If to-morrow's sun rose upon a single Katharine Clare, then good-bye to Claverley Castle as far as Kate and her parents were concerned; for they could not afford to keep it without the MacBalloch fortune; and the MacBalloch fortune would be finally forfeited if Kate were not wed to-day.

Yet he tarried on the way and made no sign.

He knew as well as anybody that both Kate and her father were far too proud to accept aught at his hands unless they first paid the full price for it—that they would rather die of starvation than take a penny of Mrs. MacBalloch's money without fulfilling Mrs. MacBalloch's condition—that there would be no chance of inducing Kate to share his fortune unless before to-morrow she was his wife, and so claimed it as a right instead of accepting it as a favour.

Yet still he tarried and made no sign.

He knew as well as anybody that the hearts of both the Earl and his daughter were bound up in the home of their fathers—that it would be the death of the Earl and almost the death of Kate to leave Claverley Castle and give it into the hands of strangers—that the special licence, which he had set out to fetch, was a veritable reprieve from sentence of death for Lord Claverley.

And yet he tarried and made no sign.

What could it mean? This was what all the inhabitants of the Castle were asking themselves and each other, without getting any satisfactory answer; and if they had known what

the real answer was, they would have found it more unsatisfactory than their imagination pictured. But as yet they did not know the worst.

The Earl was very quiet, very composed; his fine manners stood him in good stead even when his heart was breaking, and he sought to hide his misery rather than let its shadow fall on those around him—the very quintessence of high breeding. But that his heart was breaking those who knew him well were quite aware; he could not leave Claverley and live. He never said a word of reproach or even of complaint to his daughter, though he could not but feel that it was her caprice and tardiness that had brought him to this pass. Had she never given way, he felt that it would have been more endurable; but to have given way when it was just too late was almost more than he could bear. Yet he did bear it; and bore it like the gallant gentleman that he was. But it would be too much for him; there was no doubt of that. It was strange—and also it was natural, as so many strange things are—that he, who had always been so fussy about trifles, should meet this great blow, this crowning disappointment, with calmness and fortitude. He had made vast ranges of mountains out of molehills; but now that he was brought face to face with this invulnerable and impassable rock, he ceased to complain. Things were too bad for words; there was nothing left for him but the silence of despair.

Lady Claverley, too, was very unhappy. She did not mind so much for herself; women with husbands and children rarely do; but it cut her to the heart to see her husband's misery. And what made it specially distressing to her was her own inability to comfort him, or in any way to assuage his suffering. It is terrible to a woman to see her husband suffer and to be powerless to help him. As a rule she can comfort him in most of his sundry and manifold afflictions; a man has not many troubles which a loving wife cannot cure, or at any rate soothe—and she generally succeeds in so doing,

But now and then there falls a blow which she can neither arrest nor parry—the whole force of it must fall upon him she loves, while she can only stand by and watch and pray; and it is then that she realizes the strength and the weakness of her devotion; its power to dare and its feebleness to do. There is nothing that she would not do for her husband—there is nothing that she can; her love is as strong as it is weak—as impotent as it is mighty. It is then that her very joy is turned into sorrow, and her marriage-wreath into a crown of thorns. It is her turn to stand aside; and standing aside is one of the hardest things life has to teach to those who love much. It is only when a woman is forbidden to suffer in the place of her beloved that her true suffering begins; it is only when she may no longer give up her pleasure for his that her real pleasure is over. If she may suffer in his stead, she is happy; if he may rejoice instead of her, she is content.

Yet sometimes the tide of circumstance is too strong for her. The fiat has gone forth against him, and she may not cancel a line: the handwriting has appeared upon the wall, and she may not erase a word. As the woman of old, she can only stand without, weeping: there is nothing more to be done by her. Then would we remind her that the writing upon the plaster of the wall of her king's palace was traced by the Finger of a Hand That has been pierced—that the Power before Whose decrees she trembles is known by another name than that of Fate. Therefore there is mercy to be found, and she need not fear. Love will still parry the blow that threatens, though it will not be hers: and Love, as ever, must prevail.

In its own way Lady Claverley's heart was as heavy as her lord's: and that the burden was his rather than her own, made it all the more difficult for her to bear. She was very angry with Kate; more angry than she said, or even showed. She was not of that fine—and by no means rare—order of women, in whom the maternal instinct is so strong that they put



the children before the husband: she belonged to that still finer type, with whom the husband stands, and must always stand, first. She might—and did—laugh at Lord Claverley's little peculiarities, and find fault with his small failings: she by no means posed as the submissive and adoring wife: but underneath all her half-humorous reproofs and wholly humorous banter she hid a heart which was entirely her lord's, and she revered him from the very depths of her soul. Towards anyone who dared to vex or annoy him she was as hard and bitter as only an amiable woman can be; and this hardness and bitterness were not cancelled by the fact that the offender was her own child. Few things put Lady Claverley out: she was usually the embodiment of placid good humour: but on the rare occasions, when her anger was roused, she did not easily come round again. And to injure her husband in any way—to stand between him and the fulfilment of his wishes—was in her eyes the unpardonable sin.

It is difficult—if not impossible—for hasty-tempered people to fathom the rare resentment of the habitually good-humoured. The former say so much and mean so little that they naturally conclude that those who say little mean nothing at all.

And they never make a greater mistake. They utter an angry word, and then it is all over; and they do not realize that with those to whom the angry word was uttered it has only just begun. On the other hand, the amiable people argue that if they who say so little mean so much, how infinitely much must those others mean who say so much more than they do! Each judges the other from his own standpoint: and consequently neither judges righteous judgment.

Thus Kate could not altogether understand her mother's attitude in the present difficulty. Because her own hot Clare temper boiled over the moment it became warm, she did not realize that the tardily lighted anger of the Lauries produced a fiercer and more lasting flame. She had not the

shadow of an idea how hard her mother found it to forgive her for thus breaking her father's heart: yet she knew that her father had already freely forgiven her for breaking his own. It is ever a noteworthy fact that those people who are easily annoyed over petty irritations bear great injuries with equanimity: while those who smile at minor offences are as hard as the nether millstones against graver ones. It was now the Countess's turn to be angry, and the Earl's to be calm. But it must be remembered in Lady Claverley's defence that it was her husband's heart, and not her own, that was the breakable object: therefore the greater injury was hers.

But although Kate was ignorant of her mother's anguish in the present crisis, she understood to the full all that her father was suffering; and the knowledge well-nigh crushed her to the earth. It was agony to her to see the once proud head bowed, the once firm hands trembling; and to know that it was she who had brought this misery on her dearly loved father. True, she had succumbed at last, and done all that could possibly be expected of her: but her sacrifice had come too late.

If she had only made up her mind six months ago to face the difficulty and to agree to the conditions of the Will, Claverley Castle would have been saved, and her father's grey hairs would not have been brought down in sorrow to the grave: but she had been wilful and petulant, insisting on having her own way at all risks and going into battle without counting the cost. And the cost had proved too much for her.

Of course she might have hugged to her heart the comforting thought that she was too womanly a woman to marry for aught but love—to sell herself even for so high a price as Claverley Castle. That would have been some slight consolation to her in the present condition of chaos; for the good opinion of ourselves—the approbation of our own judgment—is a strong support to us in times of distress and difficulty. But even this last scrap of comfort was snatched from poor Kate.

For during the last few hours a strange revelation had been vouchsafed to her—one of those sudden enlightenments which sometimes come to women, but never to men, since the masculine mind moves more slowly and steadily than the feminine one. There had suddenly dawned upon Kate the full meaning of her hatred for George Despard.

She had often wondered why she had detested him so much ; why her dislike of this particular man had become an actual and tangible thing, permeating her thoughts and controlling her actions. Now she knew.

All the past was made clear to her. She understood now her emotional awakening at Ladyhall, her restless dissatisfaction at Elnagar. She had imagined that it was Death which had opened her eyes to Life's deeper mysteries and higher interests—which had shown her the hollowness of the things which are seen and temporal, compared with the fulness of the things which are not seen and eternal. Now she knew that although Death had rudely roused her from her slumber of irresponsibility and careless ease, it was Death's Conqueror that had taught her the value of Life and had changed her from a girl into a woman.

Truly an angel had troubled the waters of her soul and stirred them to their hidden depths, in order that whosoever first stepped in after the troubling of the waters should be rested and refreshed and made whole. But the name of the angel was not Death, but Love.

She loved George—loved him with her whole heart—had loved him from the moment when he incurred her righteous indignation by daring to kiss her without her leave and against her will. That was the simple and yet wonderful explanation of it all. And she had discovered it just too late.

The primitive womanhood in her had struggled—unconsciously perhaps, but with all her strength—against this strange, this overwhelming passion ; the maidenly pride of her spirit had fought against the dominating power of the man. Yet, none the less, the greater force had prevailed.

Unlike the typical girl of her time, she had not placed her passion under a microscope, watching its progress and development with as much intelligent interest as if it had been a microbe, and vivisectioning her own heart in her search for scientific truth. Katharine Clare belonged to an older and a simpler race. Like the prehistoric woman, she had struggled fiercely against an instinct that was too strong for her; and like the prehistoric woman, she had succumbed. It was all absolutely simple and natural; in fact, far too simple and natural to be understood by the woman of to-day.

She made up her mind that if George returned in time to marry her before the fatal twentieth, she would tell him the truth. She would confess to him that the terms he had proposed—namely, of troubling her with as little of his society as possible after once they were man and wife—were not for her. Nay, she was prepared to love and to cherish, to honour and serve him, till death did them part; and even to obey him if necessary.

But she was also determined—if he did not return within the appointed time—to let her secret die with her. In that case neither he nor anybody else should ever know that she loved him; she would rather die than marry him after the six months were over; and she would rather die than confess she loved a man whom she was not going to marry. Somewhat foolish on her part, perhaps; but wisdom had never been one of poor Kate's strong points. Very different also from what her mother would have done; but we are all of us, alas! so much younger than our mothers—otherwise we should not pray, and pray in vain, that so large a part of our writing on life's page might be erased.

And, after all, there was something to be said for Kate's view of the question. With the whole of Mrs. MacBalloch's fortune at their command, whereby to renovate the Claverley estates, Kate and a husband might be very comfortable indeed; but with only a fraction of Mrs. MacBalloch's fortune

wherewith to pay the Earl's debts, to keep up Claverley Castle, and to support Lady Kate and her parents as they were accustomed to be supported, George Despard with Kate as his wife would still be a poor man. And he would owe—and would know that he owed—his poverty to that wife's most unjustifiable caprice. It would be enough to irritate the most amiable of men—which George undoubtedly was not; and Kate was sufficiently her mother's daughter to recognize this, though she was not sufficiently her mother's daughter also to recognize that half a loaf—even if one's own pride has to pay the duty on it—is better than no bread. Moreover, although Lady Kate was willing to marry George in order to secure her own fortune, she was far too proud to marry him in order to share his—especially now that she knew she loved him. If they were married within the prescribed limit of time, George gained pecuniarily by the transaction as well as she, as he then secured the whole of Mrs. MacBalloch's property; but if they were married after the six months were over, Despard lost heavily from a monetary point of view. And to this Kate never would consent; wherein she was entirely the daughter of her father.

It was characteristic of her and of the innate loyalty of her nature that all through the interminable day she never once doubted George. She was sure that he would have returned if he could—that he was incapable of disappointing her or even trifling with her on purpose—that it was some power outside himself (though she could not imagine what) which had prevented him from saving her at the last moment from threatened ruin. When appearances were in his favour she had doubted him; now when appearances were against him she believed in him with her whole heart. No, wisdom certainly was not one of her strong points; a more worldly-wise and sensible young woman would have concluded that this was George's punishment for her treatment of him—his revenge for all that he had suffered at her hands. But such an idea never once occurred to Lady Kate.

All that long, dreary nineteenth of February Kate wandered from room to room of the Castle like a restless ghost. She could not sit down—could not settle to anything.

“Couldn’t you employ yourself with a bit of fancy-work, my lady?” remonstrated her faithful nurse, when she strolled into the old nursery for the twentieth time that day, with no object save to stroll out of it again. “There is nothing like a bit of fancy-work for steadying the nerves; it takes the mind off the brain and on to the fingers, as you may say.”

“Fancy-work indeed!” scoffed Kate. “As if any girl could do fancy-work on a day that was to have been her wedding-day, and isn’t!”

“It would do her all the good in the world if she could, my lady. I’m sure that if the young ladies of to-day would only make embroidery on a tambourine-frame, as their grandmothers used to do, we shouldn’t hear of all the new-rotten complaints that folks talk so much about nowadays.”

“What nonsense, Tiffy! Do you suppose we can mend broken hearts with a darning-needle?”

“P’raps we can and p’raps we can’t. Folks say that our heads can save our heels; but I say that our fingers can save our feelings; for them that work with their fingers can bear troubles better than them that don’t—whether knitting or embroidery, as the case may be. But I disapprove of idleness in teetotem, as the saying is; and so did Missisopkins. She’d always make the young ladies do a bit of sewing every day, even if it was only a bit of unpicking; and right she was.”

“I don’t care. I hate sewing!” retorted Kate petulantly. It really was irritating to ask for a wedding-ring and to be put off with a thimble.

“Don’t say that, my lady. I wish you could have seen a banner-screen which was in Missisopkins’s drawing-room, being the work of her mother when she was a girl, and representing the Sultan of Turkey, with one of his harum-scarum ladies sitting by his side. It was something wonder-

ful—all done in coloured wools, with black beads for the eyes, excepting the lady's, which were blue. And the Turk had a cemetery in his hand, done with steel beads, cemetery being the name for a Turk's sword because it kills so many people."

"I see," replied Kate, who was not listening in the least.

"And the lady was something sweet—a regular parafine of beauty, as they say; in a sky-blue bicycling costume, with ringlets of real horsehair. Mastrenery used to call her a 'lily-rook,' or some such prove-black's-white sort of a name; but I am sure she was the gentleman's wedded wife, or else Missisopkins's mother would never have embroidered her. She wasn't that sort, wasn't Missisopkins's mother."

"I can't think why Mr. Despard doesn't come back," interrupted Kate, apropos of her own thoughts. "He is very late."

"He is, my lady, and I don't approve of such unpunctuality. I never knew Mastrenery or Mastrerbert late for a meal in their lives. Even as children they were never out of the way when the dinner-bell rang; they seemed to know their dinner-time without looking at their watches, their mamma had brought them up to be so punctual. The only occasion when I ever knew Mastrenery to be late was once when he was a very little boy and was bathing in the sea, and I was waiting in the machine ready to dry him and give him a biscuit the minute he came out of the water. His mamma had particularly told him that he was only to stay five minutes in the water, and he stayed seven; so I just popped my head out of the machine and called, 'Mastrenery, Mastrenery, have you got your watch with you?' He hadn't, as it happened, so it wasn't his fault that he mistook the time. Though what Misteropkins, who was sitting on the shore, found to laugh at in the incident I have never been able to discover."

"Mr. Despard is a most punctual man generally," continued the inattentive Kate; "I am afraid something must have happened to him."

"I shouldn't be surprised, my lady. A return cab may have knocked him down and run over him, or he may have been robbed and murdered and thrown into the Thames. Once Missisopkins's father's coachman was missing for ten days; and he never came back till they found he'd drowned himself in the horsepond," replied Tiffany, with the ready sympathy and solid consolation of her class.

Kate shuddered. What if her old nurse's gloomy forebodings for once were true? What if George Despard were indeed no more? What if she could never once show that she loved him—never again pretend that she did not? The mere thought was almost more than she could endure. The hours rolled on, and still he did not come. There was the empty mockery of tea—the empty mockery of dinner—and yet no George. Kate succeeded in hiding the full extent of her misery; Sapphira in concealing the intensity of her excitement. As for Lord and Lady Claverley, they vainly tried to hide from each other how bitterly each sorrowed for the other's sake.

At last the miserable day came to an end.

The Rector, who had spent the afternoon and evening with them in order to be ready to perform the service the moment the bridegroom and the licence appeared, remained with them until midnight, in the hope that George might return even at the eleventh hour. But he did not; and the clock chimed out the stroke of twelve.

The six months were over; and Lady Kate was as single at the end of them as she had been at the beginning; she was no more married by the twentieth of February than she had been on the twentieth of August!



## CHAPTER XXIX

### GEORGE'S RETURN

IT was a melancholy party that gathered together in the morning-room at Claverley Castle on the twentieth of February. The Earl, crushed by the bitter disappointment of all his hopes and full of dire forebodings as to the future, sat silently with bowed head. He looked old and broken, but no word of reproach escaped his lips. By him sat his wife, clasping his hand with ready sympathy, and now and again trying by a cheerful remark to dispel the gloom. Sapphira, whose bounden duty it was in return for benefits duly received to make conversation when the spirits of the others flagged, was unusually silent. She was full of apprehension for her father—and not a little frightened for herself. What had happened? That something had taken place—and that Aubrey Lestrangle had had his share in that something—she had no manner of doubt. Now, too late, she saw what she had done in her mad jealousy of her cousin. Why had she acted in this way? Why had she helped to ruin those who had befriended her in her need? And then, supposing her father had rashly brought himself within the meshes of the law? Yes, Sapphira was filled with mingled remorse and terror, and was of no use whatever as a talking-machine.

As for Kate, it would be hard to describe her feelings. Her half-fearful joy in her newly-made discovery that she loved George—that she had always loved him, even when most bitter against him—was mingled with agonizing doubts

as to his personal safety. What could have happened? Had he met with an accident? Had there been a hitch over the special licence? But if so, why had he not telegraphed? Though everything seemed to point to the conclusion that, having suffered bitterly at her hands, he had planned a cruel revenge—that he had brought her to his feet and then spurned her, as she had spurned him at Ladyhall—she could not bring herself to accept this solution of the problem. She still trusted George—trusted him all the more strongly because of her previous distrust. Yet her father and mother might come to this conclusion, for had not they during the last two days been made aware of something at least of the state of affairs between George and herself at Ladyhall? Yes, they might believe that George had in revenge deserted her. The only relief in the bitterness of this thought lay in the fact that he and they were in ignorance of her love; that secret was hers, hers alone, and should go to the grave with her. None should know of her weakness. But, for all that, her woman's heart was still torn with anxiety for the safety of her newly found idol. With quick imagination she saw him crushed amid the *débris* of a railway accident, and she bit her lip till the blood came to stop herself from crying aloud in her agony. Nor was she insensible to her father's sorrow. She longed to go and try to comfort him. It would have been a relief to her if he had turned on her and loaded her with reproaches. His silent grief, his pitiful remembrance of every little courtesy that was customary to him, cut her as with a whip. Far better than this the sternest rebuke, the bitterest upbraiding!

The rain had ceased, and the fog had disappeared, giving place to one of those bright days, wherewith February sometimes pretends that it is May. Outside the sun was shining, and the birds were welcoming the change with cheerful songs of thanksgiving. In the valley the river shone like silver in the sunlight, while the distant western hills lost themselves in

an azure haze. An ideal day! Had things been otherwise, Kate might have been wandering hand in hand with George, lost in wonder at the beauty of nature, and still more at the new bliss, the almost unbelievable bliss, of being together for time and for eternity. How different it was for Kate now! The fairness of the scene was almost an insult to her in her wretchedness: a day of stormy wind, of pelting rain, of crashing thunder would have been more suited to her mood.

As they thus sat almost in silence, without energy to read or work or go out into the brilliant sunshine, there was a sound of wheels. Sapphira rushed to the window in time to see a cab drive rapidly up to the Castle. As a bell pealed, Kate half rose, crushing her hand to her heart to try and stop its wild beating. News at last! News, yes, but most certainly bad news! There was no possibility of any satisfactory explanation. Even if George were still alive and well, the fatal hour had struck. But there was no such thought in Kate's mind; she had no remembrance of the Will or of the estate that she had lost. It was George, and George alone, who filled her heart at this supreme moment; and it seemed to her as certain as fate that he had met with his death. The door opened, and Perkins, more pompous and solemn than usual—had not the matter been discussed in all its bearings in the servants' hall?—announced, "Mr. Despard, my lady."

"Ah!" gasped Kate, as George walked into the room, looking as pale as a ghost, with huge black rings about his eyes, which were unnaturally bright. The relief from the tension of her feelings was too much for her, and she fell back in her chair overcome with faintness. The Earl jumped up, startled by Despard's ghastly appearance; but before either of them could speak, Kate, recovering herself, rushed at George and seized his hand.

"Oh, George, George," she cried wildly, "where have you been? Why did not you come yesterday, as you promised? Something terrible must have happened."

George felt a thrill at her words ; it was the first time she had called him by his name. But he did not lose his composure. Leading her to a seat, he said—

“Nothing terrible, Lady Kate, but something unusual. I will tell you all about it ; but you must sit down quietly ; there is no harm done—no reason for you to be alarmed or excited.”

He then turned to Lord Claverley, who, having satisfied himself that Despard was not a ghost, and that despite his looks he was in full command of his faculties, drew himself up with dignity ; and, remaining standing, awaited the issue in silence.

“I owe you an explanation, Lord Claverley, of my absence yesterday.”

“An explanation ?” Lord Claverley seemed simply to repeat George’s word, but a quick observer might have detected a subtle inflexion in his tone which was hardly a question, but which seemed to suggest that more than an explanation was necessary. George’s ear was quick, and a faint tinge of colour came over the pallor of his countenance.

“I gather that you consider an explanation is insufficient, and that some apology is also required. I think when you have heard me you will admit that an explanation alone is adequate, which I propose now to give.”

It must be admitted that Despard was becoming a little stilted ; but Lord Claverley did not comment on his style, which indeed was but fair, as the aforesaid grandiloquence was produced—unconsciously perhaps to the speaker—by the Earl’s stiff bearing, and merely said with a bow, “If you please, sir.”

But before he could speak, Sapphira in her turn rushed up to George, crying out—

“Oh ! Mr. Despard, has anything happened to father ?”

“Come, come, my dear,” cried the Countess, “pray control yourself. How can Mr. Despard know anything of such a

person? He has never been told that you ever had a father at all; much less his name."

The Earl winced at the mention of Lestrangle. How it could have happened he was unable to think, but it came upon him like a flash that his brother-in-law had had something to do with the mystery. The reference to the family skeleton a little disturbed his dignified pose; but with his usual kindness he said to Sapphira—

"Sit down, my dear, sit down, and let us hear what Mr. Despard has to tell us. Need I say that we are interested, most interested, in the account he so kindly proposes to give us?"

"Well, the long and the short of it is," said George, "there has been foul play. I was drugged, and the licence stolen from me while I was unconscious."

"Impossible, my dear sir, impossible!" exclaimed Lord Claverley. "Who would dare to do such a thing in the present day? Besides, no one would gain by such a course except Mr. Pettigrew; and, little as I like that gentleman, I cannot believe that he would—that he could—be guilty of so criminal a proceeding."

It is not to be wondered at that the Earl found some difficulty in swallowing George's preposterous statement, but the latter held to his ground. "I am not surprised that you find it hard to believe me, Lord Claverley; nevertheless what I say is true."

"Pardon me, Mr. Despard, if I seemed to doubt your word," cried the Earl, with his usual grace and dignity; "and believe me that nothing was further from my thoughts than to throw any doubt upon the statements of one whom I have long respected as a thorough gentleman and esteemed as a sincere friend. All I meant to infer was that you were under a misapprehension—that you were labouring under a delusion. I fear, however, that I apparently failed in courtesy towards you by giving you a wrong impression of my meaning; and

I can only pray you to pardon an old man whose heart is too full of sorrow for him to choose his words aright."

"I will tell you my story as briefly as I can," said George, "and leave you to make your own comments on it, Lord Claverley. As you know, I went up to town the day before yesterday (the eighteenth of February) in order to get the special licence for my private marriage with Lady Kate on the nineteenth."

"That is so," agreed the Earl.

"I was met at Paddington, much to my surprise, by Mr. Pettigrew; but he explained his presence there by saying he had come to meet a co-director who was expected by that train and hadn't turned up. Now, however, I see that the co-director was merely a blind to conceal foul play; but at the time I believed in him completely."

Lady Claverley shook her head. "You shouldn't have believed a word that that horrid Pettigrew-man said: I never did. My instinct warned me against him the moment I first set eyes on him. I only caught sight of the back of his head hanging his hat up in the hall, but from that instant I knew he was two-faced."

"Unfortunately, Lady Claverley, I hadn't your instincts to guide me; so I fell into Mr. Pettigrew's trap, and accepted his invitation to dine at his house that evening."

"Dear, dear, that was indeed a mistake—a sad mistake!" sighed the Earl. "I should never have accepted an invitation from such a man as Mr. Pettigrew."

"Well, unfortunately, I did. Besides, I had to see Pettigrew to explain to him the state of affairs, and to tell him of Lady Katharine's intention to fulfil Mrs. MacBalloch's condition even at the eleventh hour: and dinner with him seemed an excellent opportunity of discussing these matters in full."

"I should have avoided the entertainment, I should indeed," commented Lord Claverley, with a mournful shake of the head.

And all this time Kate had never said a word, but had gazed at her lover with her heart in her eyes. It was the first time she had seen him after she knew that she loved him ; and the first time a woman looks at a man knowing that she loves him is an incident of that nature which it is the fashion nowadays to term "epoch-making."

"I did all that I intended to do during the afternoon," George continued, "and put the special licence safe in my pocket-book ready for the morrow. Then I went to dine at Pettigrew's."

"Was that woman there with her dreadful Pinchards?"

"No, Lady Claverley. Pettigrew was quite alone, his wife and family being out of town. He had provided an admirable little dinner, and refused to go into business matters until we had finished it."

"I expect it was the wine that upset you," remarked the Countess, gazing sympathetically at George's pale face ; "the wine of those sanctimonious people is always cheap and unwholesome."

"On the contrary," replied Despard, "the wine was excellent ; but, as a matter of fact, I hardly touched it. After dinner was over I explained matters to my host ; and I am bound to say he took his disappointment very well."

"That was only his deceitfulness," exclaimed Lady Claverley.

"Possibly : anyhow, he seemed to take it very well. Then we had coffee, which I must say tasted very queer indeed."

Again Lady Claverley interrupted him. "What did it taste like?"

"I can't say exactly : more like nasty medicine than anything else."

"Surely you didn't drink it? You should never eat or drink anything that tastes or even smells queer, until you've first had it analyzed."

"Unfortunately I wasn't conscious of the queer taste until I

had drunk it. And, after that, I remember nothing more until I woke up late last night, in a filthy lodging-house, with no marriage licence and a splitting headache. A terrible person—apparently the landlady—answered my bell, and informed me that I had been brought there the preceding evening dead drunk. But I was no more drunk than you are, Lord Claverley; I was drugged.”

“You were poisoned!” cried the Countess; “that was what was the matter with you; poisoned by Mr. Pettigrew and those dreadful Pinchards! And I daresay you’d no antidote with you; young men are so careless!”

“Come, come, Henrietta, you are too severe—far too severe, my love! We do not live in the days of the Borgias, and cannot be expected to carry antidotes to poison about with us everywhere.”

“The landlady,” George continued, “also gave me a letter, which I will read to you. ‘Dear Mr. Despard,—I called on my friend Mr. Pettigrew last night, and found that excellent gentleman in much distress, because his cellar, which is always admirable, had proved too strong in its effects upon you. I at once relieved his anxiety and removed all responsibility from his shoulders by conveying you to my own lodgings, and giving you into the charge of my worthy landlady, who is no stranger to attacks such as the one from which you are temporarily suffering. As soon as you are sufficiently recovered to return to Claverley Castle, will you kindly inform my beloved daughter and my respected brother-in-law that I shall trouble them no more, as I have just come into a fortune of ten thousand pounds, and intend to spend the rest of my days abroad, where my modest income will go further—and fare worse—than at home? I also think it wiser, for reasons with which I need not trouble you, to leave no address behind me. Hoping that you will speedily recover from the effects of our friend Pettigrew’s excellent—too excellent!—wine, I remain, sympathetically yours, Aubrey Lestrangle.’ There; what do you think of that?”



"I think," replied Lord Claverley, "that this was a cleverly conceived—a very cleverly conceived—plot to secure the property to Mr. Pettigrew, and that Lestrangle was at the bottom of it; and was, moreover, so generously requited for his share in the transaction, that he is provided for—adequately provided for—for the rest of his life. That is what I think, Mr. Despard; and I am convinced—absolutely convinced—that my supposition is the correct one."

"Oh! uncle, uncle, I fear you are right," cried Sapphira, and, bursting into uncontrollable sobs, she fled from the room. It was not only that this fresh proof of her father's baseness shattered her ideal of him, and showed her that her idol was but the meanest clay; what hurt her still more than his innate falseness and dishonesty was his absolute indifference to herself. This cut her to the quick. Much can always be forgiven to those who love much; but the shortcomings of those who love little, or not at all, are less easy to pardon. At last Sapphira saw clearly what manner of man her father was; and realized how utterly misplaced had been her romantic devotion to him. This discovery had killed her mother. It did not kill Sapphira; but it made her a sadder and wiser woman for the rest of her life.

"There is no doubt," said the victim, "that I was drugged, and drugged by Mr. Pettigrew; but I don't see how we are to prove it."

"I suppose you couldn't have a post-mortem," said Lady Claverley wistfully. "If only one can have a post-mortem it seems to settle things so satisfactorily."

George could not restrain a smile. "I am afraid I can't oblige you so far, Lady Claverley; and without that conclusive evidence I don't see how I am ever to disprove Mr. Pettigrew's assertion that it was his too excellent wine that was to blame."

The Countess sighed. "I suppose you are right; but a post-mortem would have been more satisfactory."

"Then, my dear sir," said the Earl, "there is nothing more to be said, except that I have to offer an apology to you for having desired one. It is clear—absolutely clear—to my own mind that there has been foul play; but I fear, as you say, that there will be insuperable difficulties in the way of proving it. I will consult my lawyer, and see what he says; but even if we succeed in punishing Mr. Pettigrew—which is more than doubtful—we shall still lose the MacBalloch property; for—whether it was Mr. Pettigrew's doing or not—the fact remains that six months have elapsed since Mrs. MacBalloch's death, and my daughter is still unmarried. Therefore the Castle must go—there is no help for it." And Lord Claverley's voice died away in a sob, which cut to the quick the hearts of all who heard it.

"Stay, stay," cried George; "not so fast!"

The others looked at him in astonishment. He seemed overcome by some strange excitement, and for the moment was unable to proceed. Kate's heart again began to play strange pranks. What did this sudden outburst on the part of George mean? and why did he not go on? As a matter of fact, now it came to the point, George hardly knew how to frame in words a secret that he had jealously preserved for six long, weary months; so he stood there dumb, in very evident perplexity. Lady Claverley came to the conclusion that he was still under the influence of the drug. So she walked quietly up to him and began to pat him as if he had been a restive horse. "There, there, never mind; you'll be better soon. I'll give you a cooling draught that I mix myself, and always keep by me for emergencies like this; and then you shall lie down for an hour or two, and keep quiet till lunch-time, with no disturbing conversation and the blinds down." She spoke as if the feloniously drugging of a man in order to steal from him a special licence was among the most frequent of the trivial rounds and common tasks of everyday life; and this she did of malice aforethought, in order, as she phrased it

to herself, "not to excite the poor young man—he seemed so overwrought."

Her speech gave George time to collect his thoughts. "Thank you very much," he said gratefully; "but there is really no need for anxiety on my account. And I have something of importance to say."

He paused a minute, and then turning to the Earl went on: "It would be a lasting sorrow to me, Lord Claverley, if any negligence on my part, whether voluntary or involuntary, were the cause of Lady Kate's being deprived of the fortune left her by her godmother, or of her being unable to preserve for you the possession of Claverley Castle."

"Say no more, my dear sir, say no more. You have convinced me that your absence yesterday was unavoidable; and if I must admit that the circumstances that led to your misfortune might have been avoided, one must not expect to find old heads on young shoulders. Pray do not refer to the matter again."

"But I am afraid I must," said George, and again he hesitated as his eye met Lady Kate's. What would she think of the revelation he was about to make? Ah! he did not know what was in Kate's heart. Of the revolution which had taken place there, of the wealth of love hidden there for so long, unrecognized even by herself, that was eager to pour itself out lavishly in adoration for him, he guessed nothing. George Despard was a very ignorant young man, and knew it not; and in his case ignorance was by no means bliss. Yet as he caught her glance he did observe a something that was new to him. He was accustomed to see in her eyes amusement, scorn, indignation, indifference, even contempt; and what was this new thing? Yes; George was very ignorant in not being able to recognize the love-light in her eye. Nevertheless this strange look affected him not a little, and it was with considerable hesitation that he resumed.

"Lord Claverley," he began, "I am glad to say that your

fears lest you should have to leave your home for strangers to occupy are groundless. My kinswoman's estate is Lady Kate's, and Lady Kate's alone."

"But how can that be?" cried Lord Claverley in great excitement. "The Will distinctly stated that unless Kate were already married at the time of Mrs. MacBalloch's death, or within six months of that date, she forfeited her claims to the estate."

"That is true," said George slowly.

"Then you must be mistaken in what you said just now," interrupted the Countess. "Young men are so prone to make mistakes."

"No, Lady Claverley, I am not mistaken. It is just as I have stated."

"But it is impossible—quite impossible," cried the Earl, "unless—but that is unlikely, most unlikely—you have found a more recent Will."

"No; there is no new Will," said George, who seemed strangely reluctant to speak now that it came to the point.

"Oh, George!" cried Kate impetuously, "what does this mean? Can't you see that you are killing me by all this delay?"

"It means, Kate," said Despard slowly and solemnly, "that at the time of Mrs. MacBalloch's death you were already married."

"Married?" echoed Kate blankly.

"Yes, married—married to me!"

## CHAPTER XXX

### CONCLUSION

**H**AD a bombshell fallen into the room it could hardly have proved more startling in its effect than did George's simple statement. The Earl fell back in his chair in amazement, and then turned with utter bewilderment to his wife, his unflinching sheet-anchor in times of distress and difficulty. Even Lady Claverley was so taken aback that for the moment she was speechless; but she answered her husband's appealing glance by a grave shake of the head, which indicated, as plainly as any words, her conviction that Mr. Pettigrew's drug was still playing havoc in poor George's brain. As for Kate herself, she merely continued to gaze at George with that new expression in her eyes which he had never seen there before.

Lady Claverley was the first to break the silence. "I am sure you are not feeling well," she repeated in the voice which she always reserved for sick persons and young children; "people often don't feel well after taking poison—it is even worse than pastry for a delicate stomach. But if you'll lie down for an hour in my boudoir, I am sure you will soon be quite yourself again."

George laughed bitterly. "I see what you mean, Lady Claverley; you think that I am either mad or drunk. But I assure you that I never was more myself than I am at this moment."

"I beg you to believe, my dear sir," said the Earl in his kindest manner, "we in no wise doubt your sanity. But I think you will admit that your statement is—shall we say a little incredible?"

"Most incredible, Lord Claverley; but for all that absolutely true."

The Countess uttered a pitying sigh. "I do wish you'd let me give you that little dose, Mr. Despard."

Kate still kept silence; but her breath came short and fast, in panting gasps.

George continued, "Do you remember, Lord Claverley, that kiss I gave your daughter at the supper at Ladyhall?"

Kate's face flushed scarlet at the memory. How that kiss had made her hate—no, love—the man who gave it!

The Earl looked slightly shocked. He considered that the affair of the kiss had better have been forgotten; and he wondered at Despard's want of taste in ever referring again to so deplorable an incident. "Yes, Mr. Despard, I recall—I regret to say that I recall—the occurrence to which you refer; an occurrence which, if you will permit me to say so, would be better consigned to oblivion by all persons concerned."

"On the contrary, Lord Claverley, the more that kiss is remembered, the better for all parties concerned!"

The Countess now considered that it was time for her to interfere. "I don't think this is at all nice talk," she said severely; "I don't like talk about kisses. They are things which should never be remembered if possible, and certainly never referred to. It is all the effects of that horrid drug, Mr. Despard; but if only you'd let me prescribe for you, you'd never speak or even think of such things as kisses again. You'd be quite yourself in no time."

"I must speak of it, Lady Claverley; I want not to apologize for, but to explain that kiss."

But the Countess was still stern. "Every kiss requires an apology," she remarked; "and none needs an explanation. In fact the explanation is often worse than the kiss itself, as one learns from modern novels. They are always explaining why certain people kiss other people, and I don't think it is at all nice."

“Nevertheless it was not so unwarrantable a liberty on my part as you imagine.”

“Indeed. I’m sure poor dear mamma would not have approved of it; she never liked things of that kind; she said they reminded her of school treats.”

But George bravely held his ground, and even defied the shade of the late Lady Dunbar. “I think a man may kiss his own wife without its being considered a crime, Lady Claverley.”

“Of course; though dear mamma didn’t approve of too much of even that. But Kate wasn’t your wife; and even Lady Dunbar would have owned that that made a considerable difference.”

“That is where you make a mistake, Lady Claverley. Your daughter had just called me her husband, and I had called her my wife in the presence of innumerable witnesses: and we were in Scotland!”

Kate’s heart was beating so violently that she could hardly hear what George said, though she was straining her every nerve to do so. “What does that matter?—What does it mean?—I don’t understand!” she gasped.

Despard turned towards her, and steadied his voice by a great effort. It was hard to control himself and to hold his passion in leash when Kate looked and spoke like that; yet he did it. “It means, Lady Katharine, that if a man and a woman call each other husband and wife in Scotland before witnesses—whether in jest or in earnest—it counts as a true marriage; so married we are, whether we like it or not! I have taken counsel’s opinion on the matter, and find that I am quite correct.”

“Bless me! bless me!” cried Lord Claverley in great excitement, “I verily believe that you are right. What do you say, Henrietta? Scotland is your native land.”

The Countess gave judgment slowly, looking at her daughter meanwhile and wondering whether the latter was going to faint or to cry. Poor Kate wanted to do both, but succeeded

in doing neither. "Mr. Despard is right, Claverley; that is the Scotch law, provided that the contracting parties have both been in Scotland for three weeks, and so become domesticated or domiciled, or some word like that."

"Which we had," put in Despard.

"I remember," continued the Countess, "that a young man near Elnagar, who had a large estate, was once giving a supper-party to some of his bachelor friends on the eve of his marriage to a very nice girl. For a joke they said they would rehearse their speeches to the bride; so they had in his old housekeeper, and put her at the head of the table beside him, and toasted her, pretending she was the bride. And sure enough she was, for the next day she objected to the young man's marriage, and claimed him as her husband!"

"Dear, dear, Henrietta, what an unpleasant ending to a harmless if foolish pleasantry!"

"Very unpleasant indeed, for the Courts decided that the old housekeeper really was his wife, and that the joke at the supper-party was a true marriage. And that seems to have been a very similar affair to this business of Kate's and Mr. Despard's. But though these sorts of marriage may be all right, I can't think they are as nice as proper weddings, with bouquets and bridesmaids, and everybody knowing what they are doing, and doing it with their eyes open."

"Then—do you mean to say—that I—am really—married?" It was Kate who spoke, but her voice was not recognizable.

"Yes," replied George, also in tones not his own, "you are really married."

"And—how long—have you known this?"

"Ever since the day at Ladyhall, when you rejected me."

"Then why—didn't you—say so? Why did you keep it to yourself—and play with me—and want another marriage—and get a special licence?"

"Because I was fool enough to long for a wife who would



marry me of her own free will—because I was vain enough to think I could make you love me, and come to me of your own accord.”

“But—suppose—I had married—someone else?”

“Then I should have kept my secret, and never spoken; for these Scotch marriages are only legal when one or both of the contracting parties demand their recognition. In that case I should never have urged my claim, and it would have lapsed; for, above all things, I desired and still desire your happiness.”

“Yes—yes!” Kate’s words were more like sobs, her poor heart was beating so violently.

“But now I am determined for you to have the property to which you are legally and morally entitled, so I declare that you and I are man and wife, and I intend to substantiate my claim.”

“Most noble, most noble, my dear sir!” exclaimed Lord Claverley, grasping George by the hand, and almost beside himself with joy. “How can I ever thank you enough for your unselfish, your heroic conduct? You have saved me from the ruin that I dreaded—you have spared me to an honourable old age! I can never, never express—or repay——” And here the Earl was so overcome by his emotion that he could only blow his nose and pretend that he wasn’t crying—a most transparent deceit! His wife also endeavoured to remove an imaginary eyelash from her eye with her first finger.

George went on, “But you will understand, Lord Claverley, that the condition to which I agreed a few days—or is it a few centuries?—ago now no longer holds good, namely, to spend a portion of my time here and assume a happiness that is denied me. I will not stay on here as an amiable though unloved husband; I decline to play such a contemptible part. I have succeeded in obtaining the desire of my heart—I have secured wealth and happiness to the woman I love. Now

there is nothing left for me but to pass out of her life for ever, and to give her my word that she shall see my face no more. Good-bye." And George stalked to the door with pride in his port and pain in his heart. It was quite true that Kate's happiness was more to him than his own; but that did not mean that his own was altogether a matter of indifference.

"Stay, stay, Mr. Despard," cried Lord Claverley; "I cannot, I really cannot let you go like this. I must tell you how nobly, in my poor judgment, you have behaved; how proud I am, my dear sir, to own you as a friend—to welcome you as a son-in-law. This morning, in spite of the bitter disappointment that overwhelmed me, I felt consolation in my knowledge of the love of a dear daughter; what, then, are my feelings of delight in finding that I have in addition a son in my old age—and a son who has saved from destruction the house of Clare? As a proof of my gratitude I resign to your care my beloved daughter; and I do so with every confidence that one who has shown himself so perfect a gentleman cannot fail to prove an equally perfect husband." And again Lord Claverley had to blow his nose.

But George shook his head. "You are very kind, Lord Claverley—far kinder than I deserve. But my mind is made up, and nothing that you can say will alter it. Again good-bye."

Lady Claverley came up to George and put a detaining hand on his arm. "Nothing would induce me to let you leave this house until you have taken that little dose I spoke of," she said in her kindest voice; "and really there is no need for you ever to leave it at all, except for fresh air and exercise. Let bygones be bygones, Mr. Despard. Kate may not have been always very pleasant to you in times past; but I can assure you that when once she recognizes that she is married, she will make an excellent wife. She would not be my daughter—nor Lady Dunbar's granddaughter—if she didn't."

“Thank you, Lady Claverley; I have no doubt she would. But as it happens I don’t want an excellent wife—I want a loving one.”

“And, by Heaven, you shall have it!” cried Kate, starting from her seat and running across the room to where George was standing close by the door. The thought that he was really going—that she was to lose her life’s happiness just as it seemed within her grasp—suddenly broke the spell that had held her; and so she ran towards him with an exceeding bitter cry. “George, stay; not because *they* ask it, but because *I* do.”

Then for the first time Despard wavered; but he could not yet grasp the full meaning of Kate’s transformation. He loved her with all his heart—loved her more than life itself; but he could not yet believe that she loved him.

“And why should I stay? To be your butt, your slave, the object of your scorn? Nay; I was meant for better things than that, Kate.”

“No, no; to be my lord, my head, my sovereign. Stay—not because you love me, but because I love you; because I cannot live without you.”

George trembled so that he could hardly stand. This unexpected peep into Paradise dazed and blinded him. “Do you mean it—do you really mean it, my sweet? Is it all true?”

“As true as gospel, my beloved. See, you once kissed me against my wish; now I give you back kiss for kiss of my own free will.” And she kissed him before he had time to speak.

But the transaction did not end there, nor for some seconds afterwards; and even when it did, Kate was still in debt.

By this time the Earl and Countess were both openly shedding tears; but they were the joyful sort of tears that people shed at weddings.

Kate gazed into her husband’s face with adoration.

“Dearest, I see ‘my lances were but straws.’ You were my master all the time, and you always will be; and I am proud and happy that it should be so.”

George looked down upon her fondly. “My bonny Kate!” was all he said.

“And sometimes Kate the curst,” she added, with a little laugh.

Then he put his arm round her, and clasped her close to his heart as he whispered, “But Kate, the prettiest Kate in Christendom.”

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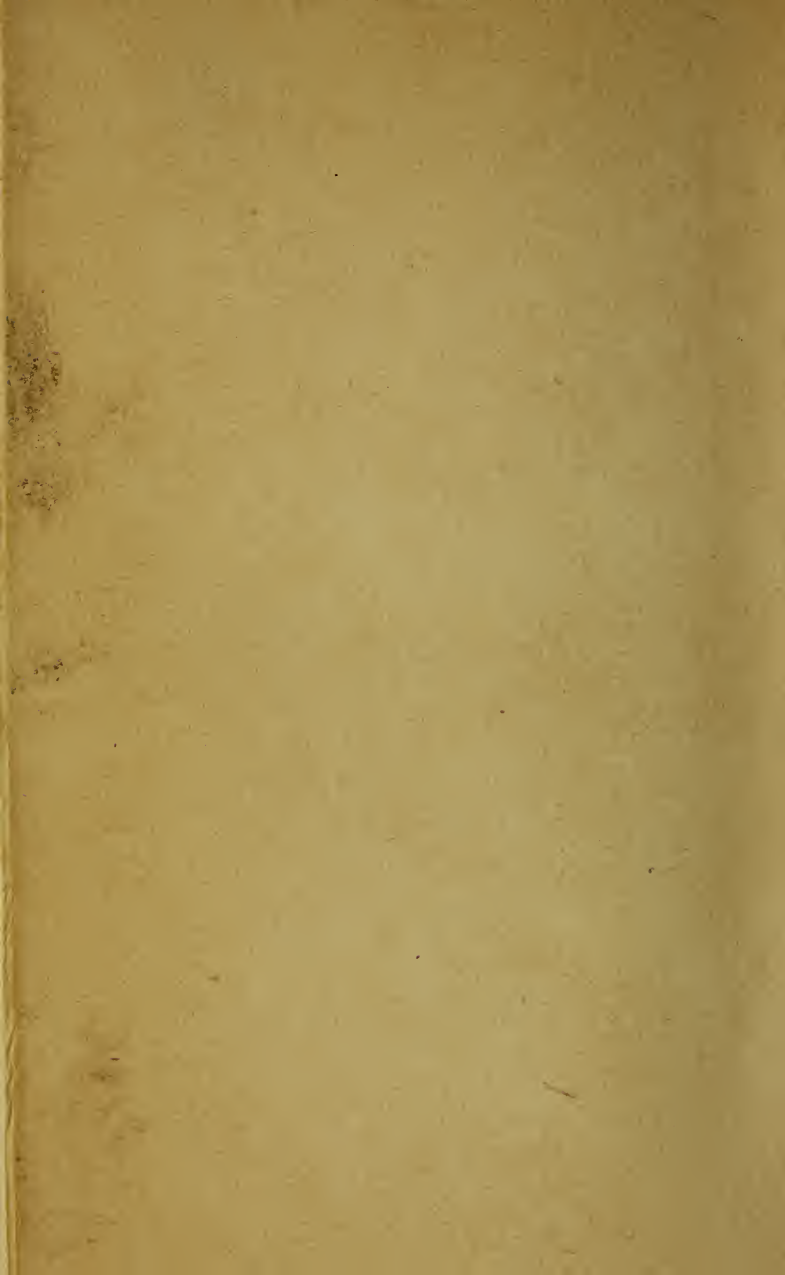
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